CAPTIVATING MARY CARSTAIRS

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AUTHOR OF "QUEED" AND "V. V.'S EYES"

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY
R. M. CROSBY

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To Nawny : Her Book

NOTE

This book, representing the writer's first effort at a long story, has something of a story of its own. First planned in 1900 or 1901, it was begun in 1905, and finished at length, in a version, three years later. Through the two years succeeding it underwent various adventures, including, if memory serves, two complete overhaulings. Having thus reached by stages something like its present form, it was, in August, 1910, favorably reported on by the publishers; but yet another rewriting preceded its final acceptance, a few weeks later. Meanwhile, I had turned to fresh work; and, as it chanced, "Queed" was both begun and finished in the interval while "Captivating Mary Carstairs" was taking her last journeys abroad. Turned away by two publishers, the newer manuscript shortly found welcome from a third. So it befell that I, as yet more experienced in rejections, suddenly found myself with two books, of widely different sorts and intentions, scheduled for publication by different publishers, almost simultaneously. As this seemed to be more books than society required from an unknown writer, it was decided to put out the present story — which is a "story," as I conceive the terms, and not a novel — over a pen name.

At that time, be it said, with an optimism that now has its humorous side, I viewed myself prospectively as a ready and fertile writer, producing a steady flow of books of very various sorts. Hence it occurred to me that a pseudonym might have a permament serviceability. So far from these anticipations proving justified, I am now moved to abandon the pseudonym in the only instance I have had occasion to use it. Writers have sometimes been charged with seeking to capitalize their own good fortune. My motive, in authorizing the republication of this story over my name, is not that. The fact is only that experience has taught me not to like pseudonymity: my feeling being that those who take an interest in my work are entitled, if they so desire, to see it as a whole.

H. S. H.

Charleston, West Virginia,
16 March, 1914

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CAPTIVATING MARY CARSTAIRS

Captivating Mary Carstairs

CHAPTER I

THE CHIEF CONSPIRATOR SECURES A PAL

In a rear room of a quaint little house uptown, a great bronzed-faced man sat at a piano, a dead pipe between his teeth, and absently played the most difficult of Beethoven's sonatas. Though he played it divinely, the three men who sat smoking and talking in a nearby corner paid not the least attention to him. The player, it seemed, did not expect them to: he paid very little attention himself.

Next to the selection of members, that is, no doubt, the most highly prized thing about the Curzon Club: you are not expected to pay attention unless you want to. It is a sanctuary where no one can bore you, except yourself. The members have been chosen with this in mind, and not chosen carelessly.

Lord Pembroke, who married a Philadelphian, is quoted as saying that the Curzon is the most democratic club in a too confoundedly democratic country. M. Arly, the editor, has told Paris that it is the most exclusive club in the world. Probably both were right. The electing board is the whole club, and a candidate is stone-dead at the first blackball; but no stigma at-

taches to him for that. Of course, it is a small club. Also, though money is the least of all passports there, it is a wealthy club. No stretch of the imagination could describe its dues as low. But through its sons of plutocracy, and their never-ending elation at finding themselves in, has arisen the Fund, by which poor but honest men can join, and do join, with never a thought of ways and means. Of these Herbert Horning, possibly the best-liked man in the club, who supported a large family off the funny department of a magazine, was one. He had spurned the suggestion when it was first made to him, and had reluctantly foregone his election; whereon Peter Maginnis had taken him aside, a dash of red in his ordinarily composed eye.

"How much?" he demanded brutally.

"How much for what?"

"How much for you?" roared Peter. "How much must the club pay you to get you in?"

Horning stared, pained.

"God meant no man to be a self-conscious ass," said Peter more mildly. "The club pays you a high compliment, and you have the nerve to reply that you don't take charity. I suppose if Congress voted you a medal for writing the funniest joke in America, you'd have it assayed and remit the cash. Chuck it, will you? Once in a year we find a man we want, and then we go ahead and take him. We don't think much of money here but — as I say, how much?"

The "but" implied that Horning did, and hurt as it was meant to. He came into the club, took cheer-

fully what they offered him that way, and felt grateful ever afterwards that Maginnis had steered him to the light.

The big man, Maginnis himself, sat on at the piano, his great fingers rambling deftly over the keys. He was playing Brahms now and doing it magnificently. He was fifteen stone, all bone and muscle, and looked thirty pounds heavier, because you imagined, mistakenly, that he carried a little fat. He was the richest man in the club, at least so far as prospects went, but he wore ready-made clothes, and one inferred, correctly, that a suit of them lasted him a long time. He looked capable of everything, but the fact was that he had done nothing. But for his money and a past consisting of thirty years of idleness, he might have been the happiest dog alive.

"The best government," said one of the three men who were not listening to the piano, "is simply the surest method for putting public opinion into power."

The sentence drifted over the player's shoulder and Brahms ended with a crash.

"Balzac said that," he cried, rising abruptly, "and said it better! But, good heavens, how you both miss the point! Why, let me tell you."

But this they stoutly declined to do. Amid laughter and protests — for the big man's hobbies were well known to the club — two of them sprang up in mock terror, and headed for the door. They indicated that they had promised each other to play billiards and dared not break the engagement.

"I could n't stay to the end, anyway, Peter," ex-

plained one, from the door. "My wife sits up when I 'm out after midnight. Meet me here for breakfast some bank-holiday, and we 'll give the day to it."

Maginnis, who never got over feeling disappointed when he saw his audience slipping away from him, sighed, searched through his frowzy pockets for a match, lit his pipe, and fell upon a lounge near to all the society that was left him.

"Why were n't you up?" said this society presently.

"The idea of dinner was repellent to me."

"To you, Peter — the famous trencherman of song and story? Why this unwonted daintiness?"

"Lassitude. Too weary to climb the stairs. Besides, I was n't hungry."

"Ah," said Reggie Townes, "you have the caveman's idea of dinner, I see. It strikes you as purely an occasion for purveying provender to man's interior. The social feature eludes you. You know what I think, Peter? You ought to go to work."

"*Work!*"

"That 's the word. What of it?"

"Not a thing. The idea was new to me; that 's all."

"Persiflage and all that aside, why don't you take a stab at politics?"

"Politics! Here in New York! I 'd sooner go into Avernus of the easy descent. If you had a town to run all by yourself now, there might be something in it. That idea of yours as to going to work, while unquestionably novel, strikes me as rather clever."

"No credit belongs to me," said Townes, "if I happened to be born brilliant instead of good-looking."

"I'll ponder it," said Peter; and stretching out his great hand with a gesture which banished the subject, he pushed a service button and begged Townes to be so kind as to name his poison.

Outside in the hall a voice just then called his name, and Maginnis answered.

A young man in evening dress strolled through the doorway, a tallish, lithe young man with a pleasant clean-cut face and very light hair. It was evident enough that he patronized a good tailor. He glanced at the two men, nodded absently, and dropped without speech into a chair near the door. Townes eyed him somewhat quizzically.

"Evening, Larry. A little introspective to-night, yes?"

Peter said: "By bull luck you have stumbled into a company of gentlemen about to place an order. Go ahead. Mention a preference."

The young man, unseeing eyes on Peter, did not answer. Instead, he sprang up, as though struck by a thought of marked interest and bolted out the door. They saw him vanish into the telephone booth across the hall and bang the glass door shut behind him.

"Forgot an engagement."

"You mean remembered one," said Peter.

"It all figures out to the same answer," said Townes; and glancing presently at his watch, he announced that he must be trotting on.

"But I've ordered something for you, man."

"Varney can use it, can't he?"

The door opened, and the tallish young man stood on the threshold again, this time social and affable. His distraitness, oddly enough, had all gone. He greeted the two in the smoking-room as though he had seen them for the first time that evening; expressed his pleasure at being in their company; inquired after their healths and late pursuits; pressed cigarettes upon them.

They rallied him upon his furtive movements and fickle demeanor, but drew only badinage in kind, and no explanations; and Townes, laughing, turned to the door.

"Dally with us yet a little while, Reggie."

"No, gentles, no! I'm starting abroad to-night and have already dallied too long."

"Abroad!"

"My sister," said Townes, "as perhaps you don't know, wedded a foreigner — Willy Harcourt, born and raised in Brooklyn. Therefore, I am now leaving to go to a party in Brooklyn. Say that to yourself slowly — 'a party in Brooklyn!' Sounds sort of ominous, does n't it? If the worst happens, I look to you fellows to break it to my mother. Please mention that I was smiling to the last."

He waved a farewell and disappeared into the hall. Varney dropped into the chair Townes had left empty, and elevated his feet to the lounge where sprawled the length of Peter Maginnis. Peter looked up and the eyes of the two men met.

"Well, Laurence? What is the proposition?"

"Proposition? What do you mean?"

"An ass," replied Maginnis, pumping seltzer into a tall glass, "could see that you have something on your mind."

Varney pulled a match from the little metal box-holder, and looked at him with reluctant admiration. "Sherlock Holmes Maginnis! I *have* something on my mind. A friend dropped it there half an hour ago, and now I've come to drop it on yours." He glanced at the room's two doors and saw that both were shut. "Time is short. The outfit upstairs may drift in any minute. Listen. Do you recall telling me the other day, with tears in your eyes, that you were slowly dying for something new and interesting to do?"

Peter nodded.

"I think of your pleasure," said Varney, "always. By looking about me and keeping my eyes and ears open at all hours, I have found you just the thing."

"New and interesting?"

"There are men in this town who would run themselves to death trying to get in it on the ground floor."

Maginnis shook his head.

"I have done everything in this world," he said almost sadly, "except, I may say, the felonies."

"But this," said Varney, "is a felony."

Struck by his tone, Peter glanced up. "Mean it?"

"Sure thing."

"As I remarked before, what is the proposition?"

"To sum it all up in a word," said Varney, "there's a job of kidnapping on and I happened to get the contract. That's all there is to the little trifle."

Peter swung his feet around to the floor, and sat up. His conviction that Varney was trying to be funny died hard.

Varney laughed. "I need a pal," he added. "Five minutes ago I telephoned and got permission to offer the place to you."

"Stop being so confounded mysterious," Peter broke out, "and go ahead!"

Varney blew smoke thoughtfully and said, "I will. In fact, that's what I came for. It's a devil of a delicate little matter to talk about to anybody, as it happens. Of course, what I tell you must never go an inch further, whether you come along or not."

"Naturally."

"You know my Uncle Elbert?"

"Old Carstairs?"

Varney nodded. "He would n't thank you for the adjective, though. I got the contract from him. By the way, he 's not my uncle, of course; he was simply a great friend of my mother's. I inherited the friendship, and in these last five years he and I have somehow managed to get mighty close together. Eight years or so ago," he continued, "as you may or may not know, Uncle Elbert and his wife parted. There was n't a thing the matter, I believe, except that they were n't hitting it off particularly well. They simply agreed to disagree. *Nouveau riche*, and all that,

was n't it? Mrs. Carstairs has some money of her own. She picked up, packed up, walked out, bought a place up the river, near Hunston, and has lived there ever since."

Peter looked up quickly. "Hunston? Ha! But fire away."

"She and Uncle Elbert have stayed pretty good friends all through it. They exchange letters now and then, and once or twice when she has been in the city, I believe they have met — though not in recent years. My private suspicion is that she has never entirely got over being in love with him. Anyhow, there 's their general relationship in a nutshell — parted but friendly. It might have stayed just like that till they were both in their graves, but for one accidental complication. There is a child."

"I seem to remember," said Peter. "A little boy."

"On the contrary. A little girl. Uncle Elbert," said Varney, "is a bit of a social butterfly. Mrs. Carstairs is an earnest domestic character. As I gather, that was what they clashed on — the idea of what a home ought to be. When the split came, Mrs. Carstairs took the child and Uncle Elbert was willing enough to have her do it. That was natural enough, Peter. He had his friends and his clubs and his little dinners, and he was no more competent to raise a girl baby than you are, which is certainly going some for a comparison. I suppose the fact was that he was glad to be free of the responsibility. But it 's mighty different now.

"You see," said Varney, lighting one cigarette

from another and throwing the old one away, "he must be pretty lonely all by himself in that big house of his. On top of that he 's getting old and is n't in very good health. Explain it any way you like. The simple fact is that within this last year or so, it 's gradually gotten to be a kind of obsession with him, an out-and-out, down-and-out monomania, to know that kid — to have her come and spend part of every year with him. That 's natural, too, I should say."

"H'm. Mrs. Carstairs sticks to her like fly-paper, I suppose?"

"Not at all. She admits Uncle Elbert's rights and is entirely willing to let him have Mary — for such is our little heroine's name — for part of the time. It is the child who is doing the fly-paper business. The painful fact is that she declines to have anything whatever to do with her father. Invitations, commands, entreaties — she spurns them all. Yes, I asked him if they had tried spanking, but he did n't answer — seemed rather miffed, in fact. The child simply will not come, and that is point number one. Now, of course, Uncle Elbert realizes that he has not been what the world would call a good father. And he has figured it out that Mary, evidently a young precocity, has judged him, found him guilty, and sentenced him to banishment from her affections. That hurts, you know. Well, he is certain that if he could once see her and be thrown with her for a few days, she would find that he is not such an old ogre, after all, would take him back as a father, as we might say, and that after that everything would be plain sailing. That 's

his theory. The point is how to see her and be thrown with her for the necessary few days."

"Why does n't he get on the train and go to Hunston? Or, if Mrs. Carstairs is really so decent about the thing, why does n't she get on the train and bring Mary down here?"

"Good. I put both of those up to him, and they seemed to embarrass him a little. I gathered that he had suggested them both to Mrs. Carstairs, and that she had turned them down hard. The ground seemed delicate. You see, we must allow for the personal equation in all this. No matter where they met, he could n't hang around the house getting acquainted with Mary without coming into sort of intimate contact with Mrs. Carstairs, and giving a kind of domestic touch to their relations. You see how that is. She wants to be fair and generous about it, but if she is in love with him, that would be a little more than flesh and blood could bear, I suppose. Then, as I say, there is the pig-headedness of the child. Anyway, Uncle Elbert assures me that both those plans are simply out of the question. So there is the situation. Mary won't come to see him by herself. Mrs. Carstairs won't bring Mary to see him, and she won't let him come to see Mary. Well, what remains?"

Peter said nothing. In a room overhead a manifestly improvised quartet struck up "Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot?" with great enthusiasm.

"You see there is only one thing. The old gentleman," said Varney, "has brooded over the matter till it 's broken him all up. He was in bed when I was

there just now. He asked me to go to Hunston and bring his daughter to him. I told him that kidnapping was a little out of my line. 'Kidnapping is rather a harsh word,' he said. 'Yes,' said I, 'it 's a criminal word, I believe.' But —"

Peter looked up, interrupting. "Is this all straight? Is that really what he wants you to do?"

"Naturally, Peter. Why not? You cling to the theory that such heroic measures are entirely unnecessary? So did I till I had threshed the whole thing up and down with Uncle Elbert for an hour and a half, trying to suggest some alternative that did n't look so silly. Kindly get the facts well into your head, will you? The man must pursue Mary's affection either there or here, must n't he? He can't do it there because his wife won't let him. In order to do it here, one would say offhand that Mary would have to be here, and since her mother declines to bring her, it does look to me as if the job would have to be done by somebody else. However, if my logic is wrong, kindly let your powerful —"

"I don't say it 's wrong. I merely say that it sounds like a cross between a modern pork-king's divorce suit and a seventeenth century peccadillo."

"And I reply that I don't care a hoot how it sounds. The only question of any interest to me, Peter, is whether or not Uncle Elbert has a moral right to a share in his own child. I say that he has such a right, and I say further that this is the only way in the world that he can assert his right. Oh, hang how it sounds! I 'm the nearest thing to a son that he has

in this world, and I mean for him to have his rights. So —"

"Very fine," said Peter dryly. "But what's the matter with Carstairs getting his rights for himself? Why doesn't he sneak up there and pull the thing off on his own?"

Varney laughed. "Evidently you don't know Uncle Elbert, after all. He's as temperamentally unfit to carry through a job of this sort as a hysterical old lady. Besides, even though they haven't met for so long, I suppose his own daughter would recognize him, wouldn't she? I never gave that idea a thought. Like his wife, he says he wants to have nothing whatever to do with it. In fact, I made him put that in the form of a promise — he's to give me an absolutely free hand, subject to the conditions, and not interfere in any way. In return I ended by swearing a great iron-clad oath not only to go, but to bring the child back with me. The swear was Uncle Elbert's idea, and I didn't mind. Confound it! — this is getting rather intimate, but here is Mrs. Carstairs's letter giving a partial consent to the thing. It just got in this afternoon; he sent for me the minute he'd read it, I believe, and I never saw a man more excited."

He pulled a scrawled and crossed note-sheet from his pocket, and read in a guarded and slightly embarrassed voice:

Hunston, 25th of September.

My Dear Elbert, — I hardly know how to answer you, though I have been over and over the whole subject on my knees. As you know, if I could send Mary to you,

I would, sadly as I should miss her, for the wish lies close to my heart to have her know her father. But she will not hear of leaving me and there is an end of that. What you suggest is so new and so *dreadful* in many ways that it is very hard to consent to it. Of course, I realize that it is not right for me to have her always. But the utmost I can bring myself to say is that if you can succeed in what you propose I will do nothing to interfere with you, and will see that there is no scandal here afterwards. Of course, I am to have no part in it, and no force is to be used, and everything is to be made as agreeable for her as is possible under the circumstances. Oh, I am miserable and doubtful about the whole thing, but pray and trust that it is for the best, and that she will find some way to forgive me for it afterwards.

A. E. C.

"H'm. No force is to be used," said Peter. "May I ask just how you expect to get Mary on the choo-choo?"

"Now we are getting to the meat of the matter," said Varney. "We shall not have to get Mary on the choo-choo at all. We are going to use a yacht, which will be far more private and pleasant, and also far easier to get people on. Uncle Elbert's *Cypriani* lies in the harbor at this moment, ready to start anywhere at half a day's notice. It will start for Hunston tomorrow afternoon, with me on board. I'll need another man to put the thing through right, and I'd rather trust a friend than a servant. So would Uncle Elbert. When I came in here just now, I was at once taken with your looks for the part, and I have been authorized by 'phone to give you first refusal on this great chance."

Peter said nothing. Varney feared that he looked rather bored.

"At first," he went on promptly, "I 'll confess that I did n't see so much in the thing. But the more I 've thought of it the more its unique charm has appealed to me. It is nothing more nor less than a novel, piquant little adventure. Exactly the sort of thing to attract a man who likes to take a sporting chance. Look at the difficulties of it. Go to a strange town where there are thousands and millions of strange children, locate Mary, isolate her, make friends with her, coax her to the yacht — captivate her, capture her! How are we to do all that, you ask? I reply, the Lord knows. That is where the sport comes in. We are forbidden to use force. We are forbidden to use Mrs. Carstairs or bring her into it in any way. We are forbidden, of course, to let the child know who we are. Everything must be done by almost diabolical craft, while dodging suspicion at every step. Can you beat it for a fascinating little expedition?"

Peter relit his pipe and meditatively dropped the match on the floor. "How old is Mary?"

"Old?" said Varney, surprised at the question, "Oh, I don't know. The separation took place — h'm — say eight years ago, and my guess is that she was about four at the time. From this and the way Uncle Elbert spoke of her, I daresay twelve would hit it fair and square. A grand age for kidnapping, what?"

"On the contrary," said Peter, "it makes it mere baby-work. Turn it over as you will, it all boils down to spanking a naughty child."

"Never! Think of slipping a cog in our plans — making a false start, having somebody get on to us! Why, man, there may be jail for us both in this!"

He examined Peter's face hopefully, but found unaffected apathy there.

"Suppose," he cried boastfully, "that the Associated Press got on to it! Think of the disgrace of it! 'Millionaire Maginnis Caught Kidnapping!' Think of being fired from the Curzon and having to leave New York a hunted and broken man! Think," he added in an inspired climax, "of having your photograph in the Sunday *Herald!*"

Maginnis perked up visibly at this. "There is no chance of that really, do you think?"

"None in the world," said Varney desperately.

He felt sure that this had cost him Peter, whom he had come to as his oldest and best friend. Having no idea whom he could turn to next, he rose, tentatively, and for the moral effect, to go.

"After all," he said aloud, "I have another man in my mind who would, on second thoughts, suit me better."

"Oh, sit down!" cried Peter, impatiently.

Larry sat down. His face showed, in spite of him, how really anxious he was to have Peter go. There was a brief pause.

"Since you are so crazy to have me," said Peter, "I 'll go."

"Thank you," said Varney. He picked up his glass, which he had hitherto not touched, drained it at a gulp and pushed the bell vigorously. "I knew," he

cried, " that you 'd see the possibilities when once your brain began to work."

Peter's faint smile was an insult in its way. " Three things have decided me to go with you, old son, and none of them has anything to do with your possibilities. The first is that I 'm the one man in a million you really need in case of trouble."

" Peter, your modesty is your curse."

" The second is — did you read the *Sun* this morning? It seems that this little town of Hunston is having a violent spasm of politics right now. Rather lucky coincidence, I should say. The dispatch I read was pretty vague, but I gather that there 's an interesting fight on between a strong machine and a small but firm reform movement."

" Ha! Occupation for you while I beat the woods for little Mary."

" I 'll need it."

" Well, what was your other wonderful reason? "

" Don't you know? It is that sixty horse-power oath your uncle made you swear."

" Because it committed me, you mean? "

The door opened, men entered noisily, and Peter had to draw Varney aside to explain darkly: " Because it committed me to wondering what difficulties foxy old Carstairs made a point of concealing from you."

" Meet me upstairs in ten minutes," said Varney, " and we 'll talk about plans."

CHAPTER II

THEY EMBARK UPON A CRIME

Varney was wrong in one thing: Mr. Carstairs's *Cypriani* was not ready to start anywhere at half a day's notice. For that reason it did not start for Hunston on the following afternoon. As always happens, the preparations for the little expedition took four times as long as anybody would have thought possible.

For these delays no blame could be attached to Peter Maginnis. He had no getting ready to do beyond bidding his father's man to pack him for a week, and obtaining from his hatter's, at an out-of-season cut-price, an immense and peculiar Panama with an offensive plaid band. Possibly it was the only hat of its kind in the world. One might picture the manufacturer as having it made up as an experiment, becoming morose when he looked at it, and ordering his superintendent to make no more like it at the peril of his life.

Peter, however, was delighted with it. Gazing at himself with smirking satisfaction in the hat-shop mirror, he ordered the old one sent home and was all ready to go to Hunston and kidnap Mary Carstairs.

But other preparations could not be completed with

such speedy satisfaction. The yacht had to coal, take on supplies, and pick up two or three extra men for the crew. A Sunday came in and threw everything back a day. Lastly the sailing-master's wife, whom Mr. Carstairs was sending along to take charge of Mary on the homeward trip, chanced to be down with an influenza.

As the details of getting ready multiplied about him, Varney's interest in his novel undertaking imperceptibly grew. The thing had come upon him so unexpectedly that it had not yet by any means lost its strangeness. To the old friend of his mother's girlhood, Elbert Carstairs, he was sincerely devoted, though knowing him for an indulgent man whose indulgences were chiefly of himself. But when, responding to his excited summons that night, he had sat and listened while Mr. Carstairs unfolded his mad little domestic plot, he had been first utterly amazed and then utterly repelled. And it was not until a final sense of the old man's genuine need was borne in upon him, of his loneliness, his helplessness, and his entire dependence upon him, Varney, that he had consented to undertake the extraordinary commission.

In a sense, it was all simply preposterous. Here was he, Laurence Varney, in sane mind, of law-abiding habits and hitherto of tolerable standing in the community, solemnly pledged to go and steal the person of a child, in defiance and contempt of the statutes of all known nations. And the place where this lawless deed was to be done was not Ruritania or the hazy dominions of Prince Otto, but a commonplace, hum-

drum American town, not an hour and a half from his office chair by the expresses.

In going about this task he was to conduct himself with the frankness and straightforwardness of a sneak-thief. Not a soul in New York was to know where he had gone. Not a soul in Hunston must dimly suspect what he had come for. It must be gum-shoe work from start to finish, and the *Cypriani's* motto would be the inspiring word, "Sh-h-h." Though he had to find a nondescript child whom he did not know from Eve, he was forbidden to do it in a natural, easy, and dashing way. He could not ring her mother's door-bell, ask for her, throw a meal-sack over her head, and whip his waiting horses to a gallop. No, he must beat the tall grasses before the old homestead until such time as she chose to walk abroad alone. Really, when you came to think of it, it was an asinine sort of proposition.

But when Mary did come out of that house, he saw that the fun would begin. A well brought-up, mon-eyed, petted and curled girl of twelve was no easy pawn in anybody's game. He could not win her love by a mere offer of gum-drops. In fact, getting acquainted was likely to be a difficult matter, taxing his ingenuity to a standstill. But he entertained no doubts of his ability to do it, sooner or later.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," mused he, glancing out of his twentieth story window, "they flock to me, children do. I 'm their good old Uncle Dudley. But why the deuce is n't she five years younger?"

Clearly, it was the next step that was the most delicate: getting Mary aboard the yacht. This was both the crux and the *finale* of the whole thing: for Uncle Elbert was to be waiting for them, in a closed carriage, at a private dock near 130th Street (Peter remaining in Hunston to notify him by telephone of the start down), and Varney's responsibilities were over when the *Cypriani* turned her nose homeward. But here lay the thin ice. If anything should happen to go wrong at the moment when they were coaxing Mary on the yacht, if there was a leak in their plans or anybody suspected anything, he saw that the situation might be exceedingly awkward. The penalties for being fairly caught with the goods promised to be severe. As to kidnapping, he certainly remembered reading in the newspapers that some States punished it with death. At any rate, maybe the natives would try to thrash him and Peter. In hopeful moments he conjured up visions of the deuce to pay.

But, after all, he was going to Hunston, whether he liked it or not, simply because Uncle Elbert had asked him. The lonely old gentleman, he knew, loved him like a son: he had turned straight to him in his hour of need. This had touched the young man, and had finally made up his mind for him. Moreover Mary, a spoiled little piece who was suffered to set her smug childish will against the combined wills of both her parents, aroused his keenest antipathy. To put her in her place, to teach her that children must obey their parents in the Lord, was a duty to society, to the State. What Uncle Elbert wanted with such a child, he could

not conceive; but since he did want her, have her he should. Tilting back his office chair and running his hand through his hair, Varney longed to spank her.

This thought came to him, definitely and for about the seventh time, at half-past one o'clock on the third day, Monday. At the same moment, his telephone-bell rang sharply. It was the sailing-master to say that his good spouse had come aboard and that everything on the *Cypriani* was in readiness for the start.

"I 'll be on board inside of an hour," said Varney.

He telephoned to Uncle Elbert, telephoned to Peter, and locked up his desk. To his office he casually gave out that pressing business matters were calling him out of town for a day or two.

The two young men had been as furtive as possible about their proposed journey. They had not met since the night Varney had dangled the hope of jail and disgrace into Peter's lightening face, and so, or otherwise, cajoled him into going along. Both of them had kept carefully away from the *Cypriani.* Now they proceeded to her by different routes, and reached her at different times, Peter first. Their luggage had gone aboard before them, and there was no longer a thing to wait for. At three o'clock, on Varney's signal, the ship's bell sounded, her whistle shrieked, and she slid off through the waters of the bay.

About the start there was nothing in the least dramatic: they had merely begun moving through the water and that was all. The *Cypriani,* for all her odd

errand, was merely one of a thousand boats which indifferently crossed each other's wakes in one of the most crowded harbors in the world.

"For all the lime-light we draw," observed Maginnis, drinking in the freshening breeze, "we might be running up to Harlem to address the fortnightly meeting of a Girls' Friendly Society."

Varney said: "Give us a chance, will you?"

CHAPTER III

THEY ARRIVE IN HUNSTON AND FALL IN WITH A STRANGER

The landscape near Hunston, as it happened, was superfluously pretty. It deserved a group of resident artists to admire and to catch it upon canvas; and it had, roughly speaking, only artisans out of a job. The one blot was the town, sprawling hideously over the hillside. Set down against the perennial wood, by the side of the everlasting river, it looked very cheap and common. But all this was by day. Now night fell upon the poor little city and mercifully hid it from view.

They had made the start too late for hurry to be any object. It was only a three hours' run for the *Cypriani,* but she took it slowly, using four. At half-past six o'clock, when their destination was drawing near, the two men went below and dined. At seven, while they were still at table, they heard the slow-down signal, and, a moment later, the rattle of the anchor line. Now, at quarter-past seven, Varney lounged alone by the starboard rail and acquainted himself with the purview.

They had run perhaps quarter of a mile above the town, for reasons which he had not communicated to

the sailing-master in transmitting his orders. One was that they might be removed somewhat from native curiosity. The other was, they might be near the Carstairs residence, which was up this way somewhere. So, between the yacht and the town lay hill and wood intervening. The *Cypriani,* so to say, had anchored in the country. Only a light glimmering here and there through the trees indicated the nearness of man's abode.

A soporific quality lurked in the quiet solitude, and Varney, sunk in a deck-chair, yawned. They had decided at dinner that they would do nothing that night but go to bed, for it seemed plain that there was nothing else to do: little girls did not ramble abroad alone after dark. Up the companion-way and over the glistening after-deck strolled Peter, an eye-catching figure in the flooding moonlight. For, retiring to his stateroom from the table, he had divested himself of much raiment and encased his figure in a great purple bathrobe. He was a man who loved to be comfortable, was Peter. Topping the robe, he wore his new Panama. Varney looked around at the sound of footsteps, and was considerably struck by his friend's appearance.

"Feeling well, old man?" he asked with solicitude.

"Certainly."

"Not seasick at all? You won't let me fetch you the hot-water bottle?"

"No, ass."

Peter sank down in an upholstered wicker chair

with pillows in it, and looked out appreciatively at the night. The yacht's lights were set, but her deck bulbs hung dark; for the soft and shimmering radiance of the sky made man's illumination an offense.

However, æsthetics, like everything else, has its place in human economy and no more. No one aboard the *Cypriani* became so absorbed in the marvels of nature as to become insensible to other pleasures. The air, new and fine from the hands of its Maker, acquired a distinct flavor of nicotine as it flitted past the yacht. From some hidden depth rose the subdued and convalescent snores of that early retirer, the sailing-master's wife. Below forward, two deck-hands were thoughtfully playing set-back for pennies, while a machinist sat by and read a sporting extra by a swinging bulb. Above forward, on a coil of rope, McTosh, the head steward and one of Mr. Carstairs's oldest servants, smoked a bad pipe, and expectorated stoically into the Hudson.

The thought of the essential commonplaceness of this sort of thing recurred to Peter Maginnis. For all his life of idleness, which was, as it were, accidental, Peter was essentially a man of action; and life's sedentary movements irked him sorely.

"Who is the individual monkeying around at the bow?" he asked presently.

"It is Mr. Bissett, the ship's engineer, who is putting a coat of white lead over the yacht's name."

"Aha! Aren't we old-sleuthy, though! And what's that piece of stage-play for?"

"All these little hookers," said Varney, "are listed in a book, which many persons own. Why have the local press tell everybody to-morrow that the yacht *Cypriani* belonging to Mr. Carstairs, husband once-removed to our own Mrs. Elbert Carstairs, is anchored off these shores?"

"It seems," said Peter, "like a lot of smoke for such a little fire."

He got up and sprawled on the rail, his yellow Panama pulled far over his eyes, his gaze fixed on the shining water.

"First and last, I've seen rivers in my time," he said presently, "big and little, pretty and not, clean and soiled, decent and indecent. Yes, boy," said he, "you can take it from me that I've seen the world's darnedest in the matter of rivers, and I have liked them all from Ganges to the Sacramento and back again. There was a time when I didn't have that sort of personal feeling for 'em, but a little chap up in Canada, he helped me to the light. He was the keenest on rivers I ever knew."

He broke off to yawn greatly, started to resume, thought better of it, checked himself, and presently said in an absent voice:

"No, that's too long to tell."

"There's two hours till bedtime."

Peter straightened and began strolling aimlessly about the deck, half regretting that they had decided to spend the evening on the yacht. Varney looked after him with a certain sense of guilt. Against this background of quiet night and moonlit peace, his en-

terprise began to look very small and easy. A ramble through the pleasant woods over there, a little girl met and played with, a leisurely stroll hand-in-hand down a woodland path to the yacht — was it for this that he had begged the assistance of Peter Maginnis, of the large administrative abilities and the teeming energies? Varney began to be a little ashamed of himself. To follow out Peter's own figure, it appeared that he had called out the fire department to help him put out a smoking sheet of note-paper on a hearth.

Soon, in one of his goings and comings, Peter halted. "There was another Hunston dispatch in the paper this morning," he vouchsafed.

"Politics?"

"Said the reform movement was a joke."

"Good one?"

"Good movement, you mean?"

"No — good joke."

"No reform movement is ever a good joke, under any circumstances whatsoever. Where it appears a joke at all, it is the kind that would appeal only to pinheads of the dottiest nature."

"I see."

"I 'm going up there to-morrow," said Peter, nodding toward the town, "and look into it a little. If there is time, I may even decide to show these fellows how a reform proposition ought to be handled to ensure results."

Far off on the hill a single light twinkled through the trees, very yellow against the pale moonlight.

Varney's eye fell upon it and absently held it. It was Mary Carstairs's light, though, of course, he had no means of knowing that.

Presently Peter lolled around and looked at him. "H'm! Sunk in a sodden slumber, I suppose?"

"Not at all. Interested by your conversation — fascinated. Ha! Here is something to vary the evening's monotony. A row-boat is drifting downstream towards us. Let us make little wagers with each other as to who 'll be in it."

He looked over his shoulder upward at the moon, which a flying scud of cloud had momentarily veiled. Peter, who had sat down again, glanced up the river.

"I don't see any boat."

"There is where the wager comes in, my son. Hurry up — the moon will pop out in another minute, and spoil the sport."

"Drifting, you say. Bet you she 's empty — broke away from her moorings and riding down with the current. Bet you half a dollar. My second bet," he said, warming to the work, "is an old washerwoman and her little boy, out on their rounds collecting clothes. It 's Monday. In case both firsts are wrong, second choices get the money."

"My bet is — Ha! Stand ready with your half! There she comes — Jove!"

"Good God!" cried Peter and sprang up.

For the moon had jumped out from behind its cloud like a cuckoo in a clock, and fallen full upon the drifting boat, now hardly fifty yards away. In

the bottom of it lay a man, sprawled over his useless oars, his upturned face very white in the moonlight, limp legs huddled under him anyhow. Something in the abandon of his position suggested that he would not get up any more.

CHAPTER IV

WHICH CONCERNS POLITICS AND OTHER LOCAL MATTERS

It was an odd sight against the setting of pretty night and light, idle talk. Peter's lip tightened.

"He 's dead, poor chap!" he said, in a low voice. "Murdered."

"So it seems. We can't be sure from here, though. Where 's that watch? Here — some of you! Lower away the dinghy! Get a move!"

The boats were on their hooks, swung outboard ready for instant use. The crew, tumbling out swiftly at the call, cleared away one and let it fall over the side. The young men went down with it, Peter seizing the oars as his by right. The floating boat with its strange cargo had drifted close and was now lost in the vast black shadow of the yacht.

"Where is it?"

"I can't — Yes! There it is. Straight back. Now a little to the right. Way enough!"

Varney, in the stern, leaned out and gripped the drifting gunwale securely. But it was so dark here that he could see almost nothing.

"He 's breathing, I think," he said, his hand against the strange man's chest. "Pull out into the light."

But just then the arm that lay under the still head unmistakably twitched.

"Good!" cried Peter and laughed a little. "Strike a match and let 's have a look at him."

Varney fumbled in his pockets, found one and scratched it on the side. Shielding the flame in his curved hand, he leaned forward and held it close to that motionless face.

It was a young face, pale and rather haggard, lined about the mouth and yellow about the eyes; the face of a clever but broken gentleman. Full of contrasts and a story as it was, it would have been a striking face at any time; and to the two peering men in the *Cypriani's* boat, it was now very striking indeed. For they saw immediately that the curious eyes were half open and were fixed full upon them.

The match burned Varney's fingers, went out and dropped into the water. He said nothing. Neither did Peter. The man in the boat did not stir. So went by a second of profound stillness. Then a somewhat blurred voice said:

"When a gentleman goes rowing — in a private boat — and is raided by a pair of unknown investigators — one of them wearing a Mother Hubbard — who strike matches in his face and make personal remarks — he naturally awaits their explanations."

The speech fell upon four of the most astonished ears in the State of New York.

Peter recovered first: the remark about the Mother Hubbard had stung him a little, even in that dumfounded moment, but he only laughed.

"The fact is, we made absolutely sure that you were a corpse. Our mistake."

"But God save us!" murmured the young man. "Can't a man die these days without a yacht-full of anxious persons steaming up and clamping a light against his eyeball?"

"But can't we do something for you?" asked Varney. "That 's what we are here for."

The young man lay still and thought a moment, which he appeared to do with some difficulty.

"To be frank," his voice came out of the dark, rather clearer now, "you can. Give me a match, will you?"

Varney laughed; he produced and handed over a little box of them. Lying flat on his back in the boat, the young man fished a cigarette out of his pocket, hurriedly, and stuck it between his lips. The next minute the spurt of a match cut the air. The two in the ship's boat caught a brief, flashing glimpse of him — thin white hands raised to thin white face.

"Something of a *poseur,* are n't you?" suggested Peter pleasantly. "What 's your rôle to-night?"

There followed a fractional pause.

"That of a vagrant student of manners and customs," answered the colorless voice. "Therefore, to imitate your frankness, you interest me greatly."

"Those who study manners," said Peter, "should learn them after a while. Why did n't you sing out, when you saw us hustling to get out a boat, and tell us not to bother, as you were only playing dead for the lark of the thing?"

"Singing, whether out or in, is an art at which I can claim small proficiency. But tell me the time, will you? I seem to have hocked my watch."

Peter laughed a little ruefully. "It 's seven thirty-six — no more and no less."

The young man sat up with an effort, and uncertainly gathered up his oars.

"You 'll excuse me, then?" he said. "I have an engagement at seven thirty, and as you see, there is little time to make it."

"We gave you a light," said Peter. "Why not reciprocate? Who the devil are you?"

"I am a part of all that I have met," said the stranger, pulling off. "I am wily wandering Ulysses. I am — "

"That will do," said Peter sharply.

He bowed gravely and rowed away. Peter looked after him for some time, in rather impressive silence.

"What d' you suppose was the matter with the beggar, anyway? He was n't drunk."

"Did n't you notice his wrists when he held them up to light his cigarette? Full of little scars."

Peter whistled. "So morphine is his trouble, is it? Listen!"

From down the river rose a faint roar, like the sound of many voices a long way off. While the two men listened, it subsided and then rose again.

"Hello!" said Varney. "Look at your student of manners and customs now."

The man in the boat was still plainly discernible, his face picked out by the moon in greenish white. But

there was no longer any lethargy in his manner. He was bending his back to his best stroke — an excellent one it was — and driving his light bark rapidly down the stream.

"My bet," said Varney, "is that he hears those shouts, and they mean something to him — something interesting and important."

"Larry, be a sport! Let 's follow this thing along and find out what it all means."

"Oh, I 'm willing to drop into town for a little reconnoissance, if you like. Maybe we can pick up something that will help us in our business."

"Spoken like a scholar and a gentleman. One minute while I get on my clothes. Oh — by the way! Er — this new — robe of mine does n't look like a Mother Hubbard, does it?"

"In my opinion," said Varney, "two things could not well be more utterly unlike."

Peter was back in five minutes, clothed and in his right mind. His falling foot hit the center-line of the gig with a thump, and they shot away toward the town wharf.

They bade the boat wait their signal in the shadows a little upstream, and jumped out upon the old and rotting landing. A street ran straight before them, up a steep hill and into the heart of the town, and they took it, guided by a burst of still distant laughter and hoarse shouts. Toiling up the evil sidewalk, they looked about curiously at the town which was to engage their attention for the next day or so. Over everything hung that vague air of dejection and moral

decay which is so hard to define and so easy to detect. The street was lit with feeble electric lights which did little more than nullify the moon. Grass grew at its pleasure through the broken brick pavement; and even in that dimness, it was very evident that the White Wing department had been taking a long vacation.

Varney's eye took in everything. It occurred to him that this was a most extraordinary place for the family of the exquisite and well-fixed Elbert Carstairs to live. Hard on the heels of that came another thought and he stopped.

"What's the matter?" said Peter.

"We simply must n't get mixed up in any doings here, you know. Can't afford it. Whatever is going on, our rôle must be that of quiet onlookers only. Remember that."

"Quiet onlookers it is. Hello! Did you see that?"

"What?"

"Old duck in a felt hat walking behind us, a good distance off — I 'd heard him for some time. He stopped when we stopped, and when I turned then I was just in time to see him go skipping up the side street."

"Well, what of it?"

"Not a thing. I 'm interested in the sights of the town, that 's all. Listen to those hoodlums, will you?"

In the middle of that block rose a great public building of florid and hideous architecture, absurdly expensive for so small a town, and running fast to

seed. On the corner ahead, at the crest of the slope, stood the handsomest and most prosperous-looking building they had yet seen. Its long side was cut by many windows, all brilliantly lit up, and above the lower tier ran the gold-lettered legend:

WINES & LIQUORS. THE OTTOMAN. D. RYAN.

"When the saloon-keeper is the richest man in town," observed Peter, "look out for trouble."

A roar of laughter, mingled with various derisive cries, broke out just then, now from very near. The next minute the two men reached the brow of the hill, and both stopped involuntarily, arrested by the tableau which met their gaze beyond.

They stood on the upper side of a little rectangular "square," at the lower edge of which, some fifty yards away, were gathered possibly thirty or forty jostling and noisy men. Facing them, standing on a carriage-block at the curb, stood a cool little man obviously engaged in making a speech. The commonness of the men and the rough joviality of their mood were the more accentuated by the supreme dignity of the orator. He was a very small man, with pink cheeks and eye-glasses, beautifully made and still more beautifully dressed; and for all their boisterous "jollying" his auditors appeared rather to like him than the contrary.

The men from the *Cypriani* crossed the square and came up with the merry-making Hunstonians. Varney's gaze went round the circle of faces and saw inefficiency, shiftlessness, and failure everywhere

stamped upon them. Suddenly his wandering eye was arrested by a face of quite a different sort. Directly opposite stood the eccentric young man of the row-boat, watching the show out of listless eyes whose expression never changed.

"On that horse-block," said Peter, raising his voice to carry above an outburst of catcalls and allegedly humorous comment, "stands the Hunston Reform Movement. Giving 'em a ripping talk, too — all out of Bryce, Mill, and the other fellows."

But at that moment, as luck had it, the oratory came to a sudden end. A sportive bull-pup, malevolently released by some one in the crowd, danced up to the horse-block, barking joyfully, and made a lightning dive for the spellbinder's legs. The spellbinder dexterously side-stepped; the dog's aim was diverted from that fleshy portion of the thigh which his fancy had selected; but his snapping teeth closed firmly in the tail of the pretty light-gray coat, which the little man wore rather long according to the mode of the day. And there he swung, kicking and snarling, squirming and grunting, in the liveliest fashion imaginable.

Merry pandemonium broke out among the onlookers; they howled with shameless delight. It was hardly a pleasant scene to witness, though redeemed by the little orator's gameness. His face, when he took in what had happened to him, slowly turned the color of a sheet of white paper. With indescribable dignity, he descended from his rostrum, carrying the dog along, and walked out into the ring. In front of a

tall, loose-jointed, scraggly-mustached fellow he paused, and stared him in the eye with steady fixity.

"T-t-take your d-d-damned d-dog off me, Hackley," he said, stuttering badly, but very cool.

But Hackley backed away, shaking his head and bellowing with laughter. In an ecstasy of delight, the onlookers began pressing more closely about the men, narrowing the circle. And then it was that Peter, quite forgetting his rôle of quiet onlooker and unable for his life to restrain himself longer, put his shoulder to the ring and broke a vigorous way through. He touched the little orator on the arm.

"No need to trouble the gentleman," Varney heard him say pleasantly. "Just hold the position a moment, please." And so saying he swung back his foot.

It landed with an impact that was loud and not agreeable to the ear. The dog dropped with a frightful howl and, yelping madly, fled. Simultaneously, cries arose about the ringside, and the dog's owner, an alcoholic blaze in his eye, spat bitterly into his two palms and headed straight for Peter.

"What in the blank-blank d' yer mean by kickin' my blank dog, you blank-blankety-blank, you?" he inquired.

"I meant that he was behaving as no dog should," explained Peter, "and the same remark applies to you."

He was not without skill at fisticuff, was Hackley. With the speed of a tiger, he let out first his left fist, then his right, at Peter Maginnis's head. But instead of arriving there, they collided with a forearm which

had about the resiliency of a two-foot stone-wall. Simultaneously, Peter released his famous left-hook — had of the Bronx Barman at ten dollars a lesson — and the fight was over.

Mr. Hackley's head struck first, and struck passionately; men picked him up and bore him limply from the field. And Peter, a tiny spot of red in the corner of his right eye, spoke thus to the horseshoe of watching faces:

"You're a devil of a fine gang of red-hot sports, aren't you, boys? A whole regiment of you with no more decency than to pick on one man like this. I come from a white man's country where this kind of thing doesn't go — thank God! And any man who has formed a bad opinion of my manners and my general style of conversation can just step out into the ring and let me explain my system to him."

But nobody accepted that invitation. Possibly the rub was that no one cared to see that left-hook work again, at his own expense, or to encourage any trouble to come athwart his quiet career. At any rate, there were a few mutterings here and there; and then some one sang out:

"None fer mine, Mister! I ain't took out my life insurance yet."

There was a general laugh at this, and with that laugh Peter knew that all hope of more fighting was gone. He bade them a sardonic good-night, hooked his arm through the orator's (who actually showed signs of an intention to resume his speech), and bore him off down the street.

The three men walked half a block in silence, and then the little stranger stopped short.

"I say," he said in a faintly unsteady voice, "I want to thank you for taking that confounded dog off me. In another minute he might have torn my coat, don't you know?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Peter, repressing a smile. "Kicking dogs is rather a specialty of mine, and it is n't often I get the chance to attend to two of them in one evening. I would n't give the episode another thought."

The little man gave a sudden fierce laugh. "Oh, certainly not! It's a mere bagatelle for a candidate for Mayor to get a hand-out like that from a gathering of voters!"

"Mayor! I beg your pardon! Of course I did n't quite understand."

Whereupon Peter begged to introduce himself as an ardent amateur statesman, a student of good government from New Hampshire to New Zealand and from Plato to Lincoln Steffens, who had — er — come to Hunston hoping to see something of the fight for reform. The candidate, in turn, produced cards. It became apparent that he bore the name of J. Pinkney Hare. And the upshot of the colloquy was that the two young men presently found themselves invited to call upon Candidate Hare next morning, and learn something of the situation.

"I'll be delighted," accepted Peter promptly, — "delighted."

"That's settled then. Good-night — and thanks awf'ly for your assistance."

He pivoted on his trim heels, abruptly, and went away up the side street.

Peter turned to Varney with a faint grin. "That chap gets his first lesson in the art of being a reformer to-morrow. Curious, was n't it? — stumbling right into the heart of the agitation an hour after we hit the town."

Varney, who had followed Peter's activities of the last five minutes with considerable disapproval, did not answer his smile.

"Give me a hasty sketch of your conception of a quiet onlooker, will you, Peter?"

"Tush!" said Peter. "Why, can't you see that this sort of thing will make the finest kind of blind? St! Here 's our little friend coming back again."

"I say," called the voice of J. Pinkney Hare out of the gloom.

"Yes?" said Peter.

The candidate drew nearer.

"Our city is not plentifully supplied with amusements," he began in his somewhat pompous manner. "It just occurred to me that, in lieu of anything better, you gentlemen might care to go home with me now. I should be happy to have you — and to reciprocate your courtesy in any way within my power."

Peter, doubtless remembering the slow time he had been having on the yacht, brightened instantly and visibly.

"Why, *thanks*. I 'll be awfully glad to come. I — er — I 'm tremendously interested in your situation here, I assure you."

Then, catching a warning glance from Varney, who politely declined the invitation, he apologized to the candidate and drew his captain briefly aside.

"I 'll pick up all the information I can — understand?" he murmured hurriedly. "And don't you worry. A little flurry in politics will make the best sort of a cover for you while you sneak around after Mary."

On that the two friends parted. Peter hurried on after the little reformer, and Varney, turning, continued his way down Main Street toward the river and the *Cypriani,* not entirely displeased, after all, that Peter had found some congenial diversion for the evening.

The street was almost a desert. If the unmistakable sounds of revelry by night meant anything, nearly the whole population was behind him in the Ottoman bar. But in the middle of the next block, two ragged men, standing idly and talking together, turned at the sounds of the young man's steps. One of them, revealed by a near-by shop-light, had straggly gray whiskers, vacant eyes, and a bad foolish mouth. Both of them stared at Varney with marked intentness. He had to go quite out of his way to get round them.

"They don't see strangers every day, I take it," he thought absently; and suddenly he cast an inquiring eye at the heavens.

The night, so shining half an hour before, was becoming heavily overcast. Clouds had rolled up from nowhere and blotted out the moon. About him the night breeze was freshening with a certain signifi-

cance; and now unexpectedly there fell upon his ear the faint far rumble of thunder. Decidedly, there would be rain, and that right soon. Varney quickened his pace.

At the end of that quiet block he came upon a crimson-cheeked lady, somewhat past her first youth and over-plump for beauty, who was engaged in putting up the shutters at her mother's grocery establishment. Glancing around casually at his approach, her glance became transfixed into a stare.

"Well!" she exclaimed in surprise and not without coquettishness — "if it ain't Mr. Ferris!"

"If it ain't Mr. Ferris — what then?" asked Varney. "For, madam, I assure you that it ain't."

The woman, taken aback by this denial, only stared and had no reply ready. But the young man, walking on, was set to thinking by this second encounter, and presently he mused: "I 'm somebody's blooming double, that 's what. I wonder whose."

And on that word, as though to get an answer to his speculation, he suddenly halted and turned.

He had now progressed nearly a block from the buxom young woman of the grocery. For some time, even before that meeting, he had been aware of light, steady footsteps behind him on the dark street, gaining on him. By this time they had come very near; and now as he wheeled sharply, with a vague anticipation of Peter's "old duck in a felt hat," he found himself face to face with quite a different figure — that of a thin young man whom he recognized.

"Bless us!" said Varney urbanely. "It 's the student of manners again."

The pale young stranger stopped two paces away and gave back his look with the utmost composure.

"Still on my studies," said he, in his flat tones — "though I doubt," he added thoughtfully, "if that fully explains why I have followed you."

"Ah? Perhaps I may venture to ask what would explain it more fully?"

"Oh, certainly. My real motive was to suggest, purely because of a paternal interest I take in you, that you leave town to-morrow morning — you and your ferocious friend."

Varney eyed him amusedly. "But is not this somewhat — er — precipitate?"

"Oh, not a bit of it. In fact, you hardly require me to tell you, Beany, that you were a great fool to come back at all."

"Beany!"

"You don't mind if I sit down?"

A row of packing-cases clogged the sidewalk at the point where they stood, and the young man dropped down wearily upon one of them, and leaned back against the store-front.

"Beany?" repeated Varney.

"It was dark down on the river," observed the other slowly, "but the instant I saw you on the square, I recognized you, and so, my friend, will everybody else."

"With even better success, I trust, than you have done. For my name is not Beany, but indeed Varney — Laurence Varney — permit me —"

"Ah, well! Stick it out if you prefer. In any case —"

"But do tell me the name of this individual to whom I bear such a marked resemblance. I naturally —"

"The individual to whom you bear such a marked, I may say such a very marked, resemblance," said the stranger, mockingly, "is a certain Mr. Ferris Stanhope, a prosperous manufacturer of pink-tea literature. You never heard the name — of course. But never mind about that. I should advise you both to leave town anyway."

"Is it trespassing too far if I ask —"

"Any one who associates with little Hare, as I have a premonition that you two will do if you stay, is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

Varney came a step nearer and rested his foot on the edge of the packing-case.

"Now that," said he, "is by all odds the best thing you've said yet. Elucidate it a bit, won't you? I admit to some curiosity about that little tableau in the square —"

"Yes? Well, I owe you one for that box of matches, Beany — er — Mr. — and it would be rather asinine for you or your pugilistic partner to begin monkeying with our buzz-saw. I happened, you see, to overhear part of your talk with J. Pinkney Hare just now. How others might view it I know not, but to me it seemed only fair to warn you that that interesting young man must be shunned by the wise. As to the mayoralty, he has as much chance of getting in as a jack-rabbit has of butting a way through the Great Wall of China. For we have a great wall here of the sturdiest variety."

He meant, as he briefly explained, the usual System, and back of it the usual Boss: one Ryan, owner of the Ottoman saloon and the city of Hunston, who held the town in the hollow of his coarse hand, and was slowly squeezing it to death.

"The election," he went on listlessly, "is only two weeks off, but the rascal is n't lifting a finger. He does n't have to. To-morrow night he holds what he calls his annual 'town-meeting' — a fake and a joke. The trustful people gather, listen to speeches by Ryan retainers, quaff free lemonade. Nominally, everybody is invited to speak; really only the elect are permitted to. I saw a reform candidate try it once, and it was interesting to see how scientifically they put a crimp in him."

"And J. Pinkney Hare?" queried Varney becoming rather interested.

Was everything, the young man explained, that Ryan was not — able, honest, unselfish, public-spirited. Studying the situation quietly for a year, he had uncovered a most unholy trail of graft leading to high places. But when he began to try to tell the people about it, he found his way hopelessly blocked at every turn.

"He can't even hire a hall," summarized the stranger. "Not to save his immortal soul. That was the meaning of the ludicrous exhibition a few minutes ago. In one word, he can't get a hearing. He might talk with the tongues of men and angels, but nobody will listen to him. It is a dirty shame. But what in the world can you expect? Lift a finger against the

gang, and, presto, your job 's gone, and you can't find another high or low. Ryan's money goes everywhere — into the schools, the church, the press. The press. That, of course, is the System's most powerful ally. The — infamous *Hollaston Gazette* — "

"The *Hollaston Gazette* — is that published here?" asked Varney in surprise, for the *Gazette* was famous: one of those very rare small-town newspapers which, by reason of great age and signal editorial ability, have earned a national place in American journalism.

"Named after the county. You have heard of it?" said the young man in a faintly mocking voice, and immediately went on: "The *Gazette* is eighty years old. Even now, in these bad times, everybody in the county takes it. They get all their opinions from it, ready-made. It is their Bible. A fool can see what a power such a paper is. For seventy-seven years the *Gazette* fully deserved it. That was the way it won it. But all that is changed now. And the paper is making a great deal of money."

"It is crooked, then?"

"I said, did I not, that it was for Ryan?"

He lounged further back in the shadows upon his packing-case; he appeared not to be feeling well at all. Varney regarded him with puzzled interest.

"A very depressing little story," he suggested, "but after all, hardly a novel one. I don't yet altogether grasp why — "

"Your Jeffries of a friend is a red-hot political theorist, is n't he?" asked the other apathetically. "Our Hunston politicians are practical men. They

are after results, and seek them with small regard, I fear, to copy-book precepts. You follow me? Rusticating strangers, visiting sociological students, itinerant idealists, these would do well to speak softly and walk on the sunny side of the road."

"You appear," said Varney, his curiosity increasingly piqued, "to speak of these matters with authority —"

"Rather let us say with certitude."

"Possibly you yourself have felt the iron-toothed bite of the machine?"

"I?"

"Why not?"

The young man looked shocked; slowly his pale face took on a look of cynical amusement. "Yes, yes. Certainly. Who more so?" He appeared to hesitate a moment, and then added with a laugh which held a curious tinge of defiance: "In fact, I myself have the honor of being the owner and editor of the *Gazette* — Coligny Smith, at your service —"

"Coligny Smith!" echoed Varney amazed.

The young man glanced up. "It was my father you have heard of. He died three years ago. However," he added, with an odd touch of pride, "he always said that I wrote the better articles."

There was a moment's silence. Varney felt by turns astonished, disgusted, sorry, embarrassed. Then he burst out laughing.

"Well, you have a nerve to tell me this, Smith. In doing so, you seem to have brought our conversation to a logical conclusion. I thank you for your

kindly advice and piquant confession, and so, good evening."

Mr. Smith straightened on his packing-case and spoke with unexpected eagerness.

"Oh — must you go? The night 's so young — why not — come up to the Ottoman and have something? I 'll — I 'd be glad to explain — "

"I fear I cannot yield to the editorial blandishments this evening."

"Well — I merely — "

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. But remember — you 'll get into trouble if you stay."

Varney laughed.

He went on toward his waiting gig feeling vaguely displeased with the results of his half-hour ashore, and deciding that for the future it would be best to give the town a wide berth. The privacy of the yacht better suited his mission than Main Street, Hunston. However, the end was not yet. He had not reached the landing before a thought came to him which stopped him in his tracks.

CHAPTER V

INTRODUCES MARY CARSTAIRS AND ANOTHER

Clearly he must see Peter, at once, before that impetuous enthusiast had had time to involve himself in anything, and tell him bluntly that he must leave the affairs of Hunston alone until their own delicate business had been safely disposed of.

In such a matter as this it was not safe to take chances. Varney had a curious feeling that young Mr. Smith's melodramatic warnings had been offered in a spirit of friendliness, rather than of hostility. Nevertheless, the eccentric young man had unmistakably threatened them. While Varney had been more interested by the man, personally, than by his whimsical menaces, the editor's conversation could certainly not be called reassuring. Smith owned a corrupt newspaper; he was a clever man and, by his own confession, an unscrupulous one, bought body and soul by the local freebooters; and if he thought the headlong intruder Maginnis important enough to warrant it, there were presumably no lengths to which he would not go to make the town uncomfortable for him, to the probable prejudice of their mission. Clearly, here was a risk which he, as Mr. Carstairs's emissary, had no right to incur. The *Cypriani* was in no position to

stand the fire of vindictive yellow journalism. Besides, there was the complicating matter of his own curious resemblance to somebody whom, it seemed, Hunston knew, and not too favorably.

Considerably annoyed, Varney turned his face back toward the town. To avoid more publicity, he turned off the main thoroughfare to a narrow street which paralleled it, and, walking rapidly, came in five minutes to the street where Peter and the little candidate had left him. This street came as a surprise to him: Hunston's best "residence section" beyond doubt. It was really pretty, spaciously wide and flanked by handsome old trees. Houses rose at increasingly long intervals as one got away from the town; and they were for the most part charming-looking houses, set in large lawns and veiled from public scrutiny by much fine foliage.

Varney cast about for somebody who would give him his bearings, and had not far to look.

Puffing stolidly on the butt of an alleged cigar, into which he had stuck a sharpened match as a visible means of support, a boy who was probably not so old as he looked sat upon the curbstone at the corner, and claimed the world for his cuspidor. He was an ill-favored runt of a boy, with a sedate manner and a face somewhat resembling a hickory-nut.

Varney, approaching, asked him where Mr. Hare lived. Without turning around, or desisting an instant from the tending of his cigar (which, indeed, threatened a decease at any moment), the boy replied:

"Acrost an' down, one half a block. Little yaller

house wit' green blinds and ornings. Yer could n't miss it. Yer party left dere ten minutes ago, dough."

"What party?" asked Varney puzzled.

"Tall big party wit' yaller hat, stranger here. Seen him beatin' it out the street for the road, him and Hare. Goin' some, they was."

"How did you know I was looking for that party?"

"Took a chanst," said the boy. "Do I win?"

His stoical gravity made Varney smile. "You do — a good cigar. That one of yours has one foot in the grave, has n't it?"

"T'ank you, boss."

"By the way," he added casually, struck by a thought, "Mrs. Carstairs must live on this street somewhere, does n't she? Which way?"

"Same way as yer party went. Last house on de street — Remsen Street. Big white one, up on a hill like."

Varney hurried off on the trail of his elusive friend. He was puzzled in the last degree to know why Peter, having just entered Hare's house, should have left it at once and gone racing off, with Hare, down this empty street toward the open country. The one explanation that occurred to him was on the whole an unwelcome one. This was that he had made an opening to introduce the subject of Mary Carstairs, and the grateful candidate had volunteered his friendly offices — perhaps to show Peter the house, perhaps actually to take him up and present him.

In the light of a depressed corner-lamp he glanced at his watch. Having supposed that it must be nearly

nine o'clock, he was surprised to find that it was only a few minutes after eight. He had the handsome street to himself. The night had grown very dark, and the faint but continuous rumble of thunder was a warning to all pedestrians to seek shelter without delay. Varney's stride was swift. Whatever Peter meant to do, he wanted to overtake him before he did it, and gently lead him to understand, here at the outset, that he was a subordinate in this expedition, expected to do nothing without orders from above.

But he found himself at the end of the street, and saw the country road dimly winding on beyond, without having found a trace of Peter, or seen any other human being. Here, for all his hurry, he was checked for a moment by a sudden new interest. Mindful of the boy's succinct directions, he paused in the shadow of the wood, which here came to the sidewalk's edge, and looked across the street for the residence of Mrs. Carstairs.

Through the trees of a sloping lawn, his gaze fell at once upon a wide rambling white house, directly opposite, well back from the street and approached by a winding white driveway. The house was well lighted; there was a porch-lamp lit; over the carriage-gate hung a large electric globe. Despite the darkness of the night, Varney had a first-rate view. The house was big; it was white; unquestionably it was up on a hill like. In fact there could be no doubt in the world that this was the house he had come from New York to find.

The sight drew and interested him beyond all expec-

tation. Presently, by a curious coincidence, something happened which increased his interest tenfold. His eye had run over the house, about the lawn, even up at the windows, taking in every detail. There was no sign of life anywhere. But now as he stood and watched, the swing front-door was unexpectedly pushed open, and, like some feat in mental telepathy, a girl stepped out upon the piazza.

Involuntarily Varney shrank back into the shadows, assuming by instinct the best conspirators' style, and glued his eyes upon the impelling sight. Not that the girl herself was peculiarly fascinating to the eye. The porch-light revealed her perfectly: a small, dark, nondescript child, not above thirteen years old, rather badly dressed and, to say truth, not attractive-looking in any way. But to Varney, at the moment, she was the most irresistibly interesting figure in the six continents.

She came to the top of the step and stood there, peering out into the darkness as though looking for some one. Varney, from his dark retreat stared back at her. There they stood unexpectedly face to face, the kidnapper and his quarry. A sudden wild impulse seized the young man to act immediately: to make a dash from his cover, bind the girl's mouth with his handkerchief, toss her over his shoulder, and fly with her to the yacht. That was the way these things ought to be done, not by the tedious and furtive methods of chicanery. But, since this man-like method was forbidden him, why should he not at least cross boldly and go in — a lost wayfarer inquiring for directions

— anything to start up the vitally necessary acquaintance? Would he ever have a better chance?

The thought had hardly come to him before the child herself killed it. She turned as suddenly as she had come and disappeared into the house. That broke the spell; and Varney, interested by the discovery that his heart was beating above normal, slipped unseen from his lurking-place, and resumed his interrupted progress after Peter and Hare.

Beyond the Carstairs's fence of hedge, the houses stopped with the sidewalk. The highway, having no longer anything to keep up appearances for, dwindled into an ordinary country road, meandering through an ordinary country wood. What could have carried Peter out here it was impossible to conceive; but clearly something had, and Varney raced on, hoping at every moment to descry his great form looming up ahead of him out of the blackness.

What luck — what beautiful luck — to have found her in his very first hour in Hunston! It was half his work done in the wink of an eye. To-morrow morning, the first thing, he would return to this quiet street, watch at his ease for the child to come outdoors, saunter calmly from his hiding-place, make friends with her. By this time to-morrow night, in all human probability, he would be back in New York, his errand safely accomplished. That done, Peter could play politics to his heart's content. Meantime, it was more desirable than ever to tell him of these unexpected developments and deter him from taking any step which might complicate the game. . . .

A loud thunderclap crashed across the train of his thought. Another and a worse one crowded close upon it. He glanced up through the trees into the inky cavern of the skies, and a single large drop of water spattered upon his upturned forehead.

"Hang it!" he thought disgustedly. "Here comes the rain."

It came as though at his word, and with unbelievable suddenness. Thunder rolled; the breeze stiffened into a gale. Another drop fell upon his hat, and then another, and another. The young man came to an unwilling halt.

But he immediately saw that further pursuit was, for the moment at least, out of the question. The storm broke with a violence strangely at variance with the calm of the earlier evening. The heavens opened and the floods descended. Shelter was to be found at once, if at all, but as he hesitated, he remembered suddenly that he had not passed a house in five minutes. In the same moment his eye fell upon a little cottage just ahead of him, unlighted and barely perceptible in the thick darkness, standing off the road not a hundred feet away. He made for it through the driving rain and wind, stepped upon the narrow porch, discovered immediately that it gave him no protection at all, and knocked loudly upon the shut door. He got no answer. Trying it with a wet hand he perceived that it was unlocked; and without more ado, he opened it and stepped inside.

It was evidently, as he had surmised, an empty house. The hall was dark and very quiet. He leaned

against the closed front door and dipped into his pockets for a match. Behind him the rain fell in torrents, and the turbulent wind dashed after it and hurled it against the streaming windows. It had turned in half an hour from a peaceful evening to a wild night, a night when all men of good sense and good fortune should be sitting secure and snug by their own firesides. And where, oh where, was Peter?

Speculating gloomily on this and still exploring his pockets for a match, he heard a noise not far away in the dark, and knew suddenly that he was not alone. The next moment a voice floated to him out of the blackness near at hand, clear, but a little irresolute, faintly frightened.

"Did n't some one come in? Who is there?"

It was a woman's voice and a wholly charming one. There could hardly have been its match in Hunston.

"What a very interesting town!" the young man thought. "People to talk to every way you turn."

CHAPTER VI

THE HERO TALKS WITH A LADY IN THE DARK

Varney called reassuringly into the gloom: "I sincerely beg your pardon for bursting in like that. I — had no idea there was any one here."

There was a second's pause.

"N — no," said the pretty voice, hesitatingly. "You — you could n't — of course."

"But please tell me at once," he said, puzzled by this — "have I taken the unforgivable liberty of breaking into your house?"

"My house?" And he caught something like bewildered relief in her voice. "Why — I — was thinking that I had broken into yours."

Varney laughed, his back against the door.

"If it were, I 'm sure I should be able to offer you a light at the least. If it were yours, now that I stop to think — well, perhaps it *would* be a little eccentric for you to be sitting there in your parlor in the inky dark."

To this there came no reply.

"I suppose you, like me," he continued courteously, "are an unlucky wayfarer who had to choose hastily between trespassing and being drowned."

"Yes."

Inevitably he found himself wondering what this lady who shared his stolen refuge could be like. That she was a lady her voice left no doubt. His eye strained off into the Ethiopian blackness, but could make neither heads nor tails of it.

"Voices always go by contraries," he thought. "She's fifty-two and wears glasses."

Aloud he said: "But please tell me quite frankly — am I intruding?"

"Not at all," said the lady, only that and nothing more.

"Perhaps then you won't object if I find a seat? Leaning against a door is so dull, don't you think?"

He groped forward, hands outstretched before him, stumbled against the stairway which he sought, and sat down uncomfortably on the next-to-the-bottom step. Then suddenly the oddness of his situation rushed over him, and, vexed though he was with the chain of needless circumstances which had brought him into it, he with difficulty repressed a laugh.

An hour ago he had been lounging at peace upon the yacht, looking forward to nothing more titillating than bed at the earliest respectable hour. Now he was sitting with a strange lady of uncertain age in an unlighted cottage on a lonely country road, while a howling thunderstorm raved outside imprisoning him for nobody could say how long. In the interval between these two extremes, he had discovered that he was a "double," been threatened with violence, hopelessly lost Peter, and found Mary Carstairs. Surely and in truth, a pretty active hour's work!

On the tin roof of the cottage the rain beat a wild tattoo. Within, the silence lengthened. Under the circumstances, Varney considered reserve on the lady's part not unnatural; but a little talk, as he viewed the matter, would tend to help the dreary evening through.

He cleared his throat for due notice and began with a laugh.

"I was industriously chasing two men from town when the storm caught me. You know what I mean — not drumming them out of the city, but merely pursuing them in this general direction. I wonder if by any chance you happened to pass them on the road?"

"N-no, I believe not."

"A very small man, very well-dressed, and a very large man, very badly dressed, wearing a kind of curious, rococo straw hat. I know," he mused, "that you could not have forgotten that hat. Once seen —"

"Oh!" she exclaimed with sudden evidences of interest — "do tell me — is the smaller man you mention Mr. Hare?"

"He is indeed," he answered surprised. "You know him? Oh, yes, — certainly! In Hunston —"

"Know him!" said she in tones of hardly suppressed indignation. "It is he who is responsible for my being caught in this — this annoying predicament."

At something in the way the lady said that, Varney unconsciously chipped twenty years off her age and conceded that she might be no more than thirty-two.

"I 'm sorry to hear that," he said with a laugh. "I

should say that Mr. Hare has already had quite enough troubles for one night."

"Oh — then you have seen him this evening?"

"I had the pleasure of meeting him on the square not half an hour ago."

Each waited for the other to say more; and it was the lady who yielded. She went on hesitatingly, yet somehow as if she were not unwilling to justify herself to this stranger in the curious position in which she found herself.

"It — is very strange — and unlike him," she said doubtfully. "He was to call for me — at quarter past seven — and take me home. I was at the seamstress's, perhaps quarter of a mile up the road. I waited and waited — and then — Oh — what was that, do you know?"

"Only this old floor cracking. Don't flatter it by noticing. How odd to find, meeting in this way, that we are both searching for the same man. Is n't it?"

"It — seems to me even odder to find that he is not searching for me."

She was sitting, so he judged from the sound, about fifteen feet away. There was coldness in her voice as she spoke of the candidate. Varney felt sorry for that young man when he next held converse with her. From her voice he had also gathered that the dark rather frightened her, and that the presence of an unknown man had not allayed her uneasiness; though something of her reserve had vanished, he thought, when she found that the intruder knew Mr. Hare.

"Oh, but he was — is!" he cried encouragingly.

"I 'm positive that he 's searching for you at this minute. Why, of course — certainly! That would explain the whole thing."

Sitting damply on the dark stairway, he told of J. Pinkney Hare's evidently impromptu experiences in the public square, which had undoubtedly knocked from his mind all memory of his engagement at the seamstress's; and of the sudden recollection of it, which, there could be no question, was what had sent him and his new friend bursting out of the house and tearing for dear life up the road.

"I 'll bet," said he, "that not a minute after you turned into shelter, they raced by here after you. Now they 're kicking their heels at the sewing-lady's, probably soaked through, and wild to know if you got home safely. Oh, he 's being punished for his sins, never fear."

"I — am sorry for your friend," her voice replied. "And I believe that I forgive Mr. Hare — now that I know what detained him. I think I must have heard them go by — just after I got in. Once I was sure I heard voices, but, of course, I was expecting Mr. Hare to be alone."

"Ha!" thought Varney. "A Hunston romance!"

"You don't know Maginnis," he answered gloomily. "Nobody in the world ever stays alone long when Maginnis can possibly get to him."

He heard something that he thought might be a faint laugh. And immediately ten years more came off the lady's age, and she stood at twenty-two. The young man began to consider with less distaste his obvious duty of escorting her home.

In the momentary silence, wood somewhere near them once more creaked loudly and scarily.

"Oh!" came her voice out of the blackness. "Would you mind striking a match and seeing if there is n't a lamp or something we could light?"

"But I have n't a match — that 's just it! If I *had* —! Why I assure you I 've been wishing for nothing so much as a light ever since you — ever since I came in."

"If I were a man — " she began, vexedly, but suddenly checked herself. "Are you quite sure you have n't a single *one?*"

"I 'll gladly look again in all my twenty-seven pockets. I 've been doing it ever since I arrived, and I 've gotten rather to like it. But I 'm awfully afraid it 's a wild goose chase."

Crack! Crack! went the mysteriously stirring woodwork, for all the world like a living thing; and the lady again said "Oh!" And after that she said: "You are not — in this room, are you?"

"I 'm sitting quietly on the steps digging around for matches," he said. "Would you prefer to have me come in there?"

"Would you mind — ? Not that I 'm in the least frightened, but — "

"It will give me great pleasure to come — faithfully searching my pockets as I grope forward. Thus," he said, laughing, "I must grope only with my head and feet, which is a slightly dangerous thing to do. Ouch! Where are you, please?"

"Here."

"'Here' is not very definite, you know. I have nothing to steer by but my ear. Would you mind talking a good deal for a while?"

"It is not often," she said, with further signs of a thawing in her manner, "that a woman gets an invitation like that."

"Opportunity knocks at your door, golden, novel, and unique."

"The luck of it is that I can't think of anything to say. Would you care to have me hum something?"

Off came the lady's glasses, never to be donned again in fancy or in life; and Varney was ready to admit that there might be ladies in Hunston who were worse-looking than she by far. In the Stygian blackness he collided with a chair and paused, leaning upon the back of it.

"I'd like extremely to have you hum. From your voice, I — I'm sure that you do it div — awfully well. But since you seem to leave it to me, I'd honestly rather have you do something else."

"Yes?"

Larry laughed. "It's a game. A — an evening pastime — a sort of novel guessing contest. Played by strangers in the dark. You see — I must tell you that ever since you first spoke, my mind has been giving me little thumbnail sketches — each one different from the last — of what you look like."

She said nothing to this; so he laughed again.

"Oh, it's not mere curiosity, you know. It's purely a scientific matter with me. The science of deduction. The voice, you know, tells little or nothing.

I may say that I have made something of a study of voices, and have discovered that they always go by contraries. For this reason," he laughed gayly, "when you first spoke, I — but perhaps I am simply tiring you?"

There was a small pause, and then the lady spoke, with apparent reluctance:

"I am not tired."

Varney smiled into the great darkness. "Well, when I first heard your voice — ha, ha! — I made up my mind that you could not possibly be less than fifty-two."

He was rewarded with a faint laugh: this time there could be no doubt of it.

"You remember that mythological tunnel where everybody went in old and came out young. This conversation has been like that. Since we have talked," said Varney, "I have knocked thirty years off your age. But much remains to be told — and that is the game. Are you dark?"

"Are you punning?"

"This is no punning matter," he said; and began his third exploration of himself for a match. And above them the water continued to thud upon the roof like a torrent broken out of a dam.

"This is *too* bad!" breathed the lady impatiently, and plainly she was not speaking to Varney. "I believe it's coming down harder and harder every minute!"

"Yes," he answered cheerfully, "the good old rain is at it in earnest. We're probably fixed for hours and

hours. I might argue, you know," he added, "that I have a right to know these things. The box of matches I just gave away like a madman would have told me, and no questions asked. Matches and lamps you have none, but such as you have — "

"Could you not talk of something else, please?"

Varney laughed. "Certainly, if I must. Only I 've been rather generous about this, I think, showing you my hand and giving you the chance to laugh at me. You see, for all I know you may be fifty-two, after all. Or even sixty-two — Oh, glory! Hallelujah!"

"What on earth is the matter?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing at all! Just I have found a match. That 's all!"

"A *match!* Splendid!" she cried, and her voice suddenly seemed to come from a higher point in the darkness, as though she had risen. "Just one! Oh, we — you must be extremely careful with it."

"The trouble is," he said with exaggerated dejection, "it 's pretty wet. I don't know whether it will strike or not."

"You must *make* it strike. Oh, it will be — unpardonable — if you don't make it strike!"

"Then I 'll throw my soul into the work. I 'll concentrate my whole will-power upon it. On the back of this chair here — shall I?"

"All right. I 'll concentrate too. Are — you ready?"

"Ready it is," said Varney.

Gently he drew the match across the rough wood of

the chair-back, his ear all eager expectancy — and nothing happened. Thrice he did this fruitless thing, and something told him that a large section of the sulphur had been rubbed away into eternity.

"It 's nip and tuck," he breathed, stifling an impulse to laugh. "Nip and tuck!"

Pressing the match's diminished head firmly against the wood, he drew it downward vigorously and long. There was a faint crackle, a little splutter, and — glory of glories! — a tiny flame faltered out into the darkness.

"Oh — *be careful!*"

Varney cupped his hand about the little flare, and for a moment ceased to breathe. Then it caught more fully, and it was evident to both that the victory was won.

He had meant to look instantly about for lamp or candle to light; but if all his future happiness had hinged upon it, it seemed to him that he could not have helped one glance at the lady who shared that shelter and that match with him.

She stood a few feet away, regarding him breathlessly, hatted, gloved, all in white, one hand resting lightly on the center-table, one folded about the crook of a dainty draggled parasol. The match threw a small and ghostly light, but he saw her, and she wore no veil.

"Why — why — I — "

"Oh, quick! There 's a lamp just behind you."

He caught himself with a start. By incredible luck a lamp was at his very elbow; as it was the match

died on the wick. He put back the chimney and shade, turned up the wick, and the room was bathed in golden light.

It was a good-sized room, evidently newly furnished and as neat as a bandbox. The empty book-case on which the lamp rested was of handsome quartered oak, which transiently struck him as curious. But in the next instant he turned away and forgot all about it.

The lady stood where she had risen and was regarding him without a word. The lamplight fell full upon her. He came nearer, and his waning assurance shook him like a pennant in the wind and was suddenly gone. The sense of *camaraderie* which the dark had given faded; his easy friendliness left him; and he was an embarrassed young man face to face with a girl whose sudden beauty seemed to overwhelm him with the knowledge that he did not so much as know her name.

"None of my thumbnail sketches," he faltered, "made you look like this."

She had rested her wet parasol against the table, where a slow pool gathered at the ferrule, and was pulling on more trimly her long white gloves. Now she looked at him rather quizzically, though her young eyes reflected something of his own unsteadying embarrassment.

"No," she said, "I shall not be sixty-two for — for some time yet. But of course it was a game — a pastime — where I had a — little the advantage. Do you know, I — I am not entirely surprised, after all."

"Oh, are n't you?" he said, completely mystified, but as charmed by her smile as he was by the subtle change in her manner which had come with the lighting of that match.

"And it *was* nice of you to tell me that polite story at the beginning," she said. "And quick — and clever. When I heard the front door burst open, the first thing I thought of, really, was that it must be you."

"I can't think," he said, unable to take his eyes off her, "what in the world you are talking about."

She laughed with something of an effort, and sat down exquisitely in a cruel cane chair. "Well, then — *do* you forgive me for taking possession of your house like this? You will, won't you? I can't be silly, now, and pretend not to know you. But really I never dreamed that you — "

"Is it possible," he broke in stormily, "that you are mistaking me for that insufferable Stanhope?"

She looked at him startled, dumfounded; in her eyes amazement mingled with embarrassment; then her brow wrinkled into a slow, doubtful smile.

"Oh-h — I beg your pardon! I — did n't understand. But is it my fault that I 've seen your picture a hundred times? Yes, I suppose it is; for, at the risk of making you crosser still, I 'll confess that I — I cut it out and framed it."

Varney leaned his elbow on the mantel and faced her.

"You have made a mistake," he said. "I am not Mr. Stanhope."

"You mean," she laughed, very pretty and pink, "that it is no affair of mine that you are."

A kind of desperation seized him. It was evident that she did not believe him, just as Coligny Smith had not believed him, and the plump young woman of the grocery who had used his Christian name. He was almost ready not to believe himself. However, there were cards in his pocket; he got one of them out, and coming nearer, handed it to her.

"My name is Laurence Varney," he said mechanically, for that slogan seemed fated to meet skeptics everywhere. "I am from New York and have happened to come up here on a friend's yacht to — to spend a few days. You have made a mistake."

She took the card, held it lightly in her gloved hand, bowed to him with mocking courtesy.

"I am very glad to meet you — Mr. Laurence Varney! I — I am from New York, too, and have happened to come up here on the New York Central with my mother to spend a few years. And I live in a white house half a mile down the road, where I ought to have been an hour ago. And I am Mary Carstairs, who has read all your books and thinks that they — Oh" — she broke off all at once: for there was no missing the look in his astounded face. "What in the world have I said now?"

"You — can't be — *Mary Carstairs!*" he cried.

"Is — that so terrible?" she laughed, a little uncertainly.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH MARY CARSTAIRS IS INVITED TO THE YACHT "CYPRIANI"

But he recovered in a flash, aware of the criticalness of that moment, and met her bewildered gaze steadily.

"Terrible? Certainly not. Your name surprised me a little. That was all. I thought, you see, that you were somebody else."

"Yes? Who?"

"I really — do not know exactly. Do forgive my stupidity, won't you? As I say, I was just a little surprised."

"You would explain to a man," she said, "and don't you think you ought to to me? If you did not know exactly who you thought I was, why should my name surprise you so?"

He picked up a hideous china swan from a smart little oak stand and examined it with excessive interest.

"It was merely that I happen to know some one in New York who had mentioned you — and done it in a way to make me think you were not — very old. In fact, I had supposed that Miss Mary Carstairs wore short dresses and a plait down her back. You see," he said, with a well-planned smile, "how absurdly wrong I was. And then, just now, somebody pointed out your house to me. There was a girl standing in the doorway — a small, dark girl, with —"

A peal like chimes cut him short. "Dear Jenny Thurston! Our seamstress's little girl. She is spending the day with my mother, while I 've been spending most of the day with *her* mother! Turn about! But I wish you 'd tell me," she said, "who it is that could have spoken of me — to you. How interesting that we have a friend in common!"

"Not a friend," he said grimly, at the window. "Only a former — acquaintance of yours — somebody that I imagine you have pretty well forgotten. I 'll tell you — another time. But I see it has stopped raining, Miss — Miss — Miss Carstairs. Perhaps we had better take advantage of the lull to start? — for I hope you are going to let me act for Mr. Hare, and walk home wih you."

"Oh — would you! Then indeed we had!" she said rising at once. "I am horribly late now: I know my mother is frantic. I don't mind your not telling me that, really! But — it is odd that you should have spoken of my age twice to-night. Shall I tell you something, Mr. Stanhope — to show you why I have had to give up pigtails? This is my birthday: I am nineteen to-day!"

She raised her eyes, shining, heavy-fringed, deep as the sea and bluer, and looked at him. His own fell instantly. A shade of annoyance flitted across his still face.

"It is a delightful surprise," he said, mechanically. "But you must not call me Mr. Stanhope, please, Miss Carstairs."

"Why — may n't I call you by your name?"

"My name," said Varney, "in fairly legible print, is on the card which you hold in your hand."

She raised her eyes and looked at him, perplexed, hesitating, a little mortified, like one who has encountered an unlooked-for rebuff. "Forgive me," she ventured rather shyly, "but do you think it would be possible for you to — to keep an incog here — where you must have so many friends? If you want to do that — to try it — of course I 'll not tell a soul. But I 'd like it very much if you could trust — *me*, who have known you through your books for so long."

"I should be quite willing to trust you, Miss Carstairs, but there is nothing to trust you about. I am not incog. I am not the author. I have written no books whatever — "

"Ah! Then good-bye," she said with a swift change of manner, starting at once for the door. "I shall not trouble you to walk home with me. Thank you again for giving me shelter and light during the storm."

"Will you be good enough to wait one minute?"

She paused with one gloved hand on the knob, cool, resolute, a little angry, the blue battery of her eyes fixing him across her white embroidered shoulder. But he had turned away, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, brow rumpled into a frown, jaw set to anathema of the plight in which a needless fortune had plunged him.

If he let Uncle Elbert's daughter go like this, he might as well put the *Cypriani* about at once for New York, for he knew that he would never have the chance

to talk with her again. With engaging young friendliness which overrode reserve, she had been moved to ask his confidence, and he had angered her, even hurt her feelings, it seemed, by appearing to withhold it. In return she had thrown down the issue before him, immediate and final. Abstract questions of morals, and there were new ones of great seriousness now, would have to wait. Should he allow her to think that he was another man, or should he bid her goodbye and abandon his errand?

There was no alternative: she had made that unmistakable. His oath to her father came suddenly into his mind. After all, was it not a little absurd to boggle over one small deception when the whole enterprise, as now suddenly revealed, was to be nothing but one continuous and colossal one?

"Miss — Miss Carstairs," said Varney, "with *you* I shall not argue this. I am going to let you think I am whoever you want. We need n't say anything more about it, need we? Only — I 'll ask you to call me by the name I gave you, please, and, so far as you can, to regard me that way. Is that — a bargain?"

Mary Carstairs stood at the threshold of the lighted room, looking at him from under her wide white hat, eyes shining, lips smiling, cheeks faintly flushed with a sense of the triumph she had won.

"Of course," she said. "And I don't think you 'll need ever be sorry for having trusted me — *Mr. Varney!*"

He bowed stiffly. "If you will kindly open the door, I will blow out the lamp and give myself the pleasure of taking you home."

They left the hospitable cottage of Ferris Stanhope, and went out into the night, side by side, Varney and Mary Carstairs. The young man's manner was deceptively calm, but his head was in a whirl. However, the one vital fact about the situation stood out in his mind like a tower set on a hill. This was that Uncle Elbert's daughter was walking at his elbow, on terms of acquaintanceship and understanding. The thing had happened with stunning unexpectedness, but it had happened, and the game was on. The next move was his own, and what better moment for making it would he ever have?

The road was dark and wet. Rain-drops from the trees fell upon them as they walked, gathered pools splashed shallowly under their feet. Suddenly Varney said:

"Do you happen to be interested in yachts, Miss Carstairs? Mine is anchored just opposite your house, I believe, and it would be a pleasure to show her to you sometime."

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING MR. FERRIS STANHOPE, THE POPULAR NOVELIST; ALSO PETER, THE QUIET ONLOOKER

Peter had not yet returned to the yacht when Varney went to bed that night. Like the Finnegan of song, he was gone again when Varney rose next morning. Indeed, it was only too clear that his Celtic interests had been suddenly engrossed by matters much nearer his heart than the prospect, as he saw the thing, of spanking a naughty child.

"He was off by half-past eight, sir," the steward, McTosh, told Varney at breakfast. "He said to tell you to give yourself no uneasiness, sir; that he was only going to Mr. Hare's — I think was the name — for a short call, and would return by ten o'clock."

"What else did he say?"

"Well, sir, he was saying how the poltix of the village is not all they might be, but he seemed very cheerful, sir, and took three times to the chops."

At dinner-time last night such extraordinary behavior from his fellow-conspirator would have both disturbed and angered Varney. At breakfast-time this morning it hardly interested him. He had employed his walk from the cottage of refuge to the Carstairs front gate to unbelievable advantage. In fact, his mission in Hunston seemed to be all over

but the shouting, and until the moment of final action arrived, there appeared no reason why Peter should not employ his time in any way he saw fit.

The heavy storm had scoured the air, and the world was bright as a new pin. In the shaded solitude of the after-deck, Mr. Carstairs's agent sat in an easy-chair with a cigarette, and thought over the remarkable happenings of his first night in Hunston. In retrospect young Editor Smith seemed to be but the ordered instrument of fate, dispatched in a rowboat to draw him against his will from the yacht to the town, where all his business was neatly arranged for his doing. Certainly it appeared as if the hand of intelligent destiny must have been in it somewhere. No mere blind luck could have driven him half a mile into the country to the one spot in all Hunston — impossibly unlikely as it was — where he could become acquainted with Uncle Elbert's daughter without the formality of an introduction.

Uncle Elbert! How desperately the old man must desire his daughter to have planned a mad scheme like this with a subterfuge at the expense of his best friend cunningly hidden away in the heart of it. Yet, after the first staggering flash, Varney had found it impossible to be angry with Mr. Carstairs. He only felt sorry for him, sorrier than he had ever felt for anybody in his life. The old man's madness and his deceit were but the measure of his desire for his daughter. And the more he desired her, so it seemed to Varney, the more he was entitled to have her.

Interrupting his meditations, the steward ap-

proached on silent feet, bearing a flat brown-paper package in his hand. It appeared that the under-steward had just returned from a marketing tour in Hunston, had met Mr. Maginnis on the street, and been ordered to take back the parcel to Mr. Varney.

"All right, McTosh," said Varney.

He broke the string with some curiosity and pulled off the wrappers. Within was nothing but a copy of a current literary monthly.

A present of a magazine from Peter! This was a delicate apology for his remissness, indeed. "He will be sending me chocolates next," thought Varney, not a little puzzled.

He turned the pages curiously. Soon, observing a bit of brown wrapping-paper sticking out between the leaves, he opened the magazine at that point and found himself looking at a picture; and he sat still and stared at it for a long time.

It was the full-page portrait of a young man of some thirty years: a rather thin young man with a high forehead, a straight nose, and a smallish chin. The face was good-looking, but somehow not quite attractive. About the eyes was an expression faintly unpleasant, which the neat glasses did not hide. On the somewhat slack lip was a slight twist, not agreeable, which the well-kept mustache could not conceal. Still it was an interesting face, clever, assured, half-insolent. To Varney, it was exceptionally interesting; for removing the mustache and eye-glasses, it might have passed anywhere for his own.

Below the portrait was printed this legend:

FERRIS STANHOPE.

The popular author of "Rosamund," etc., who will reopen the old Stanhope cottage near Hunston, New York, and spend the autumn there upon a new novel.

Mr. Stanhope's health has not been good of late, and his physicians have recommended an extended stay in this quiet Hudson River country.

Here was that "Mr. Ferris," whom the young lady of the grocery had coyly saluted; the "Beany," whom the pale young editor had bluntly bidden to leave town; and the literary celebrity whom Miss Mary Carstairs so evidently and so warmly admired. Varney stared at the portrait with a kind of fascination. Now he saw many points of difference between the face of "the popular author" and his own. The resemblance was only general, after all. Still it was undoubtedly strong enough to warrant all kinds of mistakes.

What a very extraordinary sort of thing to have happen!

Suddenly his eye fell upon a penciled line in the white margin above the picture which had at first escaped him:

"On no account leave the yacht till I come back. Vitally important."

Varney pitched the magazine across the deck with an irritated laugh. Peter — utterly ignorant of how matters stood — attempting to fire off long-distance orders and direct his movements. The splendid gall!

As it chanced, he had no occasion to leave the yacht,

either before or after Peter got back. His work was done. He made himself comfortable with morning papers and a novel — not one of Mr. Stanhope's — and began to seek beguilement.

But his reading went forward rather fitfully. There were long intervals when his book, "eleventh printing" though it was, slipped forgotten to his knees, and he sat staring thoughtfully over the sunny water. . . .

Peter failed to keep his promise about returning to the yacht at ten o'clock. In fact, it was four o'clock that afternoon when he arrived, and at that, the manner in which he sprang up the stair indicated him as a man who had but few moments to spare to yachts and that sort of thing.

Varney, at his ease upon the transom, watched his friend's approach with a quizzical eye.

"Greetings, old comrade! How did you leave them all in Hunston?"

Peter, who, truth to tell, had been looking forward to bitter personal denunciation, looked somewhat relieved, and laughed. However, his manner suggested little of hang-dog consciousness of guilt; it was far too absorbed and business-like for that. He dropped down into a chair by Varney and swabbed the back of his neck with a damp-looking handkerchief.

"Larry, who 'd have dreamed last night that we were parting for all this time?"

"Well, not I for one."

"Awfully sorry about it all, and I know you 'll think I 'm acting like a funny kind of helper. I

had n't the faintest idea of bottling you up on the yacht all day like this, but — well, you might say, Larry, that a man could n't help it to save his life. I certainly meant to be back by the time you had finished breakfast and explain the whole situation to you — there are a deuced lot of complications, you know — but one thing led right on to another and — good Lord! I could n't find a minute with a fine-tooth comb."

"It 's all right, statesman. You don't hear me making any complaints. All I ask is a little *résumé* of what you 've been doing since you so cleverly lost me. In Reform to the ears, I suppose?"

Peter again looked rather surprised at his chief's easy indifference.

"You want that part of it first? Well," he said rapidly, "I 've been trying to do four days' work for Reform in one, and a pinch it 's been to make both ends meet, I can tell you. At it practically without a break since I left you last night. J. Pinkney took me right in and bared his soul. Said he was down and out and beaten to a fluid. A clever little devil fast enough, but no more idea of how to play the game that a baby baboon. When he caught on to what I wanted to do for him, he would have fallen on my neck except that he is n't that kind. That was this morning. I worked out my idea in the still watches: could n't sleep for thinking of it. It just means this: if my plans carry through Hare gets the biggest hearing to-night that this old town can give. And I think they 'll carry all right. You would n't be interested in the details. Now this other thing — "

"Oh, but I would, though! Give me at least a peep behind the scenes before you dash on. What about these plans of yours?"

Peter laid down the newspaper with which he had been busily fanning himself. A sudden light came into his eyes.

"I 'll tell you just how it all happened," he said in an eager voice. "Only I 'll have to hurry, as I 'm due back in town right away — that is, of course, unless you should need me for anything. Well, I left Hare last night after only a couple of hours' talk, listening to the same old story of boss-rule, and giving him, if I do say it, some cracking good practical pointers. By the way, we were interrupted at that. Had n't got started before Hare remembered that he 'd promised to bring some girl home from somewhere, and dragged me off a mile down the road, only to find out afterwards that she 'd gone home with somebody else. Made me tired. I left him about ten o'clock and started down Main Street for the river, meaning to come straight back here. But as I was footing it along, thinking over my talk with Hare and attending to my own business, who should brace me but that pale-faced rascal we saw playing dead in the rowboat. This time the *poseur* was lying flat on some packing-cases in front of a store, and who do you suppose he turned out to be?"

"The brains of the machine," said Varney.

He told briefly of his own meeting with Coligny Smith at the same spot two hours earlier, and of the editor's stagey warnings.

"Exactly the way he did me!" cried Peter. "Saved the announcement of who he was for the grand *finale* in Act V. I got mad as a wet hen, told him what I thought of him in simple language, and then when the grafter twitted me to go and do something about it, I broke loose and swore that I'd make Hare Mayor of Hunston if I had to buy the little two-by-twice town to do it. Told him to pack his trunk, for all the crooks would soon be traveling toward the timber. So then I turned right around, hiked back to Hare's, told him what I'd done, gave him my hand on it, and pulled out the old family check-book. This morning I went to him and laid before him the greatest scheme that ever was. You know Hare can't get a hall to speak in for love or money — nobody dares rent him one; he can't buy an inch of space in the *Gazette;* he can't put spreads on the billboards without having 'em pasted out in the night. To-night the whole thing's been done for him — Ryan's big town-meeting. Well, we're going to try to *swipe that meeting* — do you see? I'm getting in some husky fellows from New York to see fair play, and so on. Oh, it's a bully chance — you can see! I've spent a nice bunch of father's money working the scheme up, and, by George! I believe we are going to get by with it. If we do — well, we give this town the biggest shock it's had in years, and that's the way reform begins, Larry. *Shock!*"

Something of his contagious enthusiasm spread to and fired Varney. Fate had thrown in their way a plucky and honest man engaged in an apparently hope-

less fight against overwhelming powers of darkness. He deserved help. And what possible risk was there now when the *Cypriani's* work was practically done?

"I can't say," continued Peter dutifully, "that this is exactly playing the quiet onlooker, as my orders read. As I said last night, I consider that this excursion into politics will help our little business, not interfere with it. It will divert attention. It will seem to explain why we are here. But if you don't agree with me, if you want me to drop it — "

"No," said Varney, slowly. "I don't."

"Good for you, old sport!" cried Peter, evidently relieved. "Needless to say, I 'm right on the job whenever you need me. And nothing 's going to happen. Trust me. Now as to this other matter. You got that magazine I sent this morning?"

"Yes. Thanks for the picture of my twin brother. But why could n't I leave the yacht till you got back?"

Peter stared. "Why, just that, of course. Deuced unfortunate coincidence, is n't it? Everybody in town is going to think that you are this fellow Stanhope."

"Well?"

"*Well?* Oh, I forgot — you have n't heard. Well, from the stories that are floating round town to-day, Stanhope is a cad of the original brand. He was born here — lived here until he was twenty-one or two. Women were his trouble. The climax came about twelve years ago. The girl was named Orrick — Mamie Orrick, I believe. Nobody knows exactly what became of her, but they practically ran Stanhope out of the town then. Well — there it is."

He paused long enough to light one of his Herculean cigars, employing his hat as a wind-shield, and rapidly continued: "It 's very curious and strange, and all that, but there it is. A month or so ago the *Gazette* announced that Stanhope was coming back to Hunston. Last night you were seen on the square, and now the news has spread like wildfire that the author has arrived. Hare heard a lot of gossip on the street to-day. He 's lived here only a few years and does n't know anything personally; but he says the old feeling against Stanhope seems to have revived as though it had all happened yesterday. Orrick, the girl's father, a half-witted old dotard, was heard to say that he would shoot on sight. There are three or four others besides Orrick who 've got personal grudges too. If any of these meet you, there is almost sure to be trouble. How is that for a little complication?"

"And this was the reason you sent me word to lock myself up on the *Cypriani?* You 're a bird, Peter. Not that it made any difference, but I ventured to suppose that my leaving before you got back would interfere with some plans you had been making for me, and —"

"It would interfere with some plans I have been making for you, in a general way, to have you assassinated."

"Stuff. Ten to one all these stories that somebody has been so careful to have get back to you are right out of the whole cloth —"

"What 's the use of setting up your cranky opinions

against the hard facts? The plain truth is that everybody who ever heard of Stanhope is going to give you the cold shoulder for a dog; we can depend absolutely on that."

But Varney had his own reasons for depending on nothing of the sort.

"You 've been imposed upon, Peter. In fact, one of the population mistook me for the author last night, and instead of giving me the cold shoulder, as you say, she seemed to think that being Stanhope was the best credentials that a man could have."

"She? Who 're you talking about?"

"I 'm talking about Uncle Elbert's daughter, Miss Mary Carstairs. I had the pleasure of meeting her last night."

"The devil you did!" cried Peter, laughing with astonishment. "You certainly walk off with the prize for prompt results. How in the world did you manage it?"

Varney told him succinctly how he had managed it.

"Fine! Fine! Honestly, I was getting afraid that you never could do it at all, with the rotten reputation they 've pinned on you here. Good enough! Still it 's absurd to cite the opinion of a little child in a matter like this."

"It depends upon what you call a little child, does n't it? Miss Carstairs is nineteen years old."

Peter straightened in his chair with a jerk, and stared at him as though one or the other had suddenly gone mad.

"*Nineteen!* Why, I thought she was twelve."

"So did I."

"Why, how in Sam Hill did you ever make such an asinine mistake?"

Varney gave an impatient laugh.

"What difference does that make now? My impression was that the separation took place about eight years ago. It may have been twelve. My other impression was that the girl was about four at the time. She may have been eight instead. If it's of any interest to you, I should say that the mistake was natural enough. Besides, Uncle Elbert rather helped it along."

"Uncle Elbert rather lied to you — that's what he did," said Peter with the utmost quietness.

There was a considerable silence. Peter pulled frowningly at his cigar; it had gone out but he was too absorbed to notice it, and mechanically pulled on. Presently he raised his head and looked at Varney.

"Well? This ends it, I suppose? You'll go back to New York this afternoon?"

"No," said Varney, "I'm going to stay and carry it through just as I expected."

Peter tapped the chair-arm with his heavy fingers. "Why?"

"Because — well, I promised to, and on the strength of my promise, Uncle Elbert has gone to trouble and expense for one thing, and has pinned high hopes on me, for another. I had my chance to ask questions and make terms and stipulations — and I didn't do it. That was my fault. I am not even sure that he meant to deceive me. I have no right to break a con-

tract because I find that my part in it is going to be harder than I thought."

"This business about her age changes everything. Carstairs has no legal rights over a nineteen-year-old daughter."

"Legal rights! My dear Peter, you never supposed I thought I was doing anything legal, did you? No, no; the moral part of it has been my prop and stay all along, and that still holds. I promised without conditions, and I'll go ahead on the same terms."

"Give me a match," said Peter thoughtfully. "Maybe you are right, Larry," he added presently. "I only wanted to point out another way of looking at it. I stand absolutely by your decision. You think that this girl is wrong-headed and obstinate, and that her father has a moral right to have her, over age or not. This — discovery makes it a pretty serious business, but of course you've thought of all that. But — will it be possible now?"

"I have invited her," said Varney, with a light laugh, "to lunch on the *Cypriani* on Thursday with two or three other Hunston friends."

"Well?"

"She accepted with every mark of pleasure. Great men like Stanhope, it seems, require no introduction: it beats me. The point now is to find the other Hunston friends."

"Hare and his sister, Mrs. Marne — the very thing! — chaperon and all! I'll invite them to-night. Then the whole thing's done!" Peter sat silent a moment, looking at Varney. "I've been awfully rushed to-

day," he resumed, "because if I was going to help Hare at all, I did n't dare lose this one big opportunity. But remember, anything that has to be done from now on — I 'm your man."

"There 'll be nothing more now until Thursday. The thing 's practically done."

Peter was still looking at him steadily. "It 's going to be dirt easy, provided we don't weaken. You can't do things to your friends, but you can emphatically do them to your enemies. We have got to remember always that this girl, who has been so heartless to her old fool of a father, is our enemy."

"Yes, that is what we have got to remember."

"Good Lord!" cried Peter, looking at his watch. "Twenty minutes past four, and I must be at the hall at four-thirty sharp. I 'll have to sneak right away. You 're going to sit tight on the yacht, of course?"

"Never! I like to have a little of the fun myself. I must certainly take in this meeting to-night, and watch you put your heel on their necks and all that."

"Don't! With what you 've got to do, you can't afford to expose yourself. What 's the use of running risks, even little ones, when there is nothing to gain?"

"Satan reproving sin! Fudge! Free yourself once for all, my dear sir, that I 'm starring in The Prisoner on the Yacht for the next three days, or anything of that sort."

"Well, if you will go," said Peter, reluctantly, "here 's a reserved seat ticket — a peacherine, right up at the front."

"Great! Count on me to lead the applause."

Peter rose. His engrossed brow advertised the fact that his thought had already flown back to his own private maelstrom of new concerns.

"If Hare gets his chance to-night," he meditated out loud, "you can rely on him to make the most of it. He'll make good; he's a man, sound in wind and limb, head and heart. I do wish, though, he was n't so — somehow innocent — so easy — so confoundedly affable and handshaking with everybody that comes along. There's a sneaky-looking stranger at the hotel — rubber-heeled fellow named Higginson, with one of these black felt hats pulled down over his eyes like a stage villain — that Hare never laid eyes on till to-day. For all he knows the man may be an agent of Ryan's, a hired spy imported to — By Jove! That's just what he is, I'll bet!" he cried suddenly; and after a frowning pause, hurried warmly on: "Don't you remember last night, just after we hit the town, I said there was a man following us — sneaked up the alley when he saw me looking at him?"

"I believe I do, Peter. But the fact is that I met so many exciting people last night —"

"It's the same man — it was Higginson!" said Peter positively. "I'm sure of it! I did n't get a look at his face last night, but it's the same hat, same figure — everything. I'll bet anything he's on Ryan's payroll; and there's little Hare hobnobbing with him as friendly as though they'd been classmates at college! That kind of free-for-all geniality does n't go, you know! A reformer in a rotten town

like this," said Peter vehemently "would do well to cultivate a profound distrust of strangers."

Varney burst out laughing.

"You yourself have known Hare from the cradle, I believe?"

"I'm different," said Peter without a smile. "Well! I must move. Now let's see — that lunch. What time shall I ask Hare and Mrs. Marne for?"

"Two o'clock, Thursday. I did n't have the nerve," Varney explained, "to ask Miss Carstairs for to-day — rather lucky I did n't — and she was engaged for Thursday."

"Right. I'll arrange it all. Well, for the Lord's sake take care of yourself to-night, Larry, and trust me to keep out of trouble. So long."

Varney looked after Peter's disappearing back, and envied him all the fun he was having. His own lot was certainly far less entertaining. However, it was his own; and here he resembled his friend in one respect at least. His thoughts, like Peter's, had a way just now of reverting at short notice to the matters in which he himself was most closely concerned.

He lay back idly among the cushions, and let his mind once more run over the unexpected problems of his situation.

The new graveness of what he was pledged to do had, of course, been strongly present in his mind from the first moment of revelation. Kidnapping a nineteen-year-old girl was certainly, as Peter had pointed out, a pretty serious business. He perceived that it would not look well in the papers in the least.

Also if she cared to raise a row afterwards, there might be an aftermath which would not be wholly a laughing matter.

Nevertheless, this side of the question seemed remote and of minor interest to him just now. The problem appeared to be a personal one, not a question of statutes and judges. In his talk with Miss Carstairs before he knew her by name, he had failed to notice anything that suggested the spoiled and wilful child he had come to find. He could remember nothing she had said or done that helped him at all to think of her as his enemy. The fact was that it was all quite the other way. And this helped him to understand now, as he had not understood before, why Uncle Elbert had begged a solemn oath from him with such a piteous look on his handsome, haggard old face.

CHAPTER IX

VARNEY MEETS WITH A GALLING REBUFF, WHILE PETER GOES MARCHING ON

Peter's pronounced views as to Mr. Stanhope were not, it appeared, purely of the stuff that dreams are made of. Testimony to the author's lack of popularity in his native town came to Varney with unexpected promptness.

In the corner of the square, as he swung along toward the Academy Theatre that evening, he found himself suddenly confronted by a man who, lounging against the fence of a shabby dwelling, straightened dramatically at his approach and bent a sharp gaze upon him. He was a tall, shambling fellow with a white cloth swathed about the top of his head; and Varney, in the act of passing, suddenly recognized him as the dog man, whom Peter had knocked out the night before. His gaze was a wanton challenge for the young man to stop, and Varney cheerfully accepted it.

"Why, it 's — Mr. — er — Hackley, is n't it?"

The man's bandage left only one eye free to operate, and he kept this upon Varney with a curious unwinking stare.

"Yes," said he slowly, "I 'm Hackley."

"How 'd the dog come out?" asked Varney.

"Dead," said Hackley, as quiet in mien as the Hackley of last night was bellicose. "Dead *an'* buried."

"I 'm sorry," said Varney, his glance on the head-cloth. "The man who did the kicking was a friend of mine, and he would n't want you to lose your dog without some compensation. Er — please accept this with his compliments and regrets."

Hackley, his single washed-out eye starting with pleasure, accepted the proffered note with a gesture resembling a clutch, investigated its size in the dim light with hardly concealed delight, and pinned it into his waistcoat pocket with a large brass safety-pin. Then he raised his head slowly and looked at Varney.

"Why n't you leave town to-night, Stanhope?" he inquired casually.

Varney started. Almost to the very language this was exactly what Editor Smith had suggested to him the night before.

"Why do you call me Stanhope, Hackley? My name happens to be Laurence Varney."

Mr. Hackley's gaze never relaxed. "Chuck it," he said without emotion. "A sensible and eddicated man," he added impersonally, "never lies when a lie could n't do him no good. If I was you, Stanhope, I would n't lose a minute in cuttin' loose from this town."

"If I were Stanhope, I daresay I would n't either. But suppose I were," he added, "why should n't I stay here if I wanted to?"

"For one reason," said Mr. Hackley deliberately,

"there's me. When I'm a-feelin' myself, there ain't a cammer, a more genteel nor lor-abidin' citizen in Hunston. As for fussin' and fightin', I'd no more think of it than a dyin' inverlid in the orspitle. But only throw a few drinks under my belt like last night, and I'm a altogether different creetur. And I'm mighty afraid that the next time I over-drink myself and don't rightly know what I'm doin', I'll go out after you with a club. And then there'll be trouble."

"But why should you want to go after Stanhope with a club? What did he ever do to you?"

"Don't you know? I married Mamie Orrick's little sister!"

"Most interesting," said Varney, "as a bit of genealogy, but what's it got to do with Stanhope and the club?"

But Mr. Hackley said again, cryptically: "Chuck it." Then, softened by the young man's pleasant ways, and by the windfall of a fortune pinned into his vest: "Be sensible, Stanhope," he added amiably. "I ain't the only one. Old Orrick's heard that you've hit the town and is totin' a gun and talkin' wild. And, of course, there's others. Don't jump off no tall buildin's, I say, expectin' Providence to land you soft. There's a train to Noo York at eight-ten. Cut while you can!"

"Why, thanks," said Varney, laughing and starting on. "If I should see Mr. Stanhope at any time, I won't fail to pass him the friendly tip."

"And if you should see that friend o' yourn," called Hackley after him, "him that gimme the paste

in the jor — you c'n just tell him that Jim Hackley is goin' to fix you both, *good!*"

"At your convenience, Hackley."

The young man passed on, undisturbed by the dog man's quaint menaces. He did not exactly see himself and Peter getting into trouble at the hands of a crack-brained village humorist.

Streams of people, converging from all directions, guided him easily to the theatre. Pushing his way in, he found the stage empty and the proceedings not yet begun; and he stood for a minute at the inner door, glancing over the house. It was crowded. Oratory is a real inducement in societies seldom blessed with that attraction. Even lemonade is a magnet if you get it seldom and never to surfeit. Already men were sitting in the long low windows which ran down either side of the building; and a score of ushers, singularly alert-looking men, were hurriedly distributing camp-chairs to accommodate the overflow. Certainly, Peter could have desired no better setting for his daring adventure for reform.

Thanks to the reserved seat which his friend's reluctant liberality had furnished him, Varney was in no hurry to join the throng inside. Presently, to get clear of the rush at the doors, he strolled into the lobby and idly stood at one side, watching the people streaming by.

Thus, by sheer luck, he became witness to the crucial episode of the evening. An oily Teutonic voice spoke just at his elbow:

"Id 's eight o'clock, I zee. We 'd better go back und gif Taylor his speech, I guess."

The young man turned. He happened to be standing just in front of the little cubby of a box-office. In it stood two men, one large and fat and blonde, the other short and stocky and dark. This latter, looking up from a typewritten manuscript, spoke briefly:

"No hurry. Find Smith if you can and send him here."

The fat oily person departed obediently. Immediately there stepped through the door of the box-office a rough-looking man in a slouch hat, with three days' stubble stippling a grimy chin. He shut the door carefully and came near. Varney, from where he stood, could see and hear everything.

"Mr. Ryan?"

The stocky, dark man nodded. *Aha!* thought Varney.

"Then step outside a minute, will yer? There 's a genaman wants to speak to you right away on a matter as concerns you close."

Ryan coldly looked the man over: "Then tell him to come in here. No! I ain't got no time to fool with him now. Tell him to go to the devil."

The stranger never moved a muscle. "There 's a reason w'y he can't come in here — you 'll see when you come outside, all right." Then bringing his dark face sharply a foot nearer, he went on in a hasty undertone: "Hey, you! Ever hear of a man named Maginnis?"

Ryan had: Peter's fame had traveled far in Hunston that day.

"Well, listen! There 's a game on to bust this meetin' to-night and put the hook into you good and hard. Maginnis has spent a thousand to do it. D' yer savvy? Now will yer step lively?"

The boss considered a moment and then stepped lively. Varney, falling in behind, stepped lively too, his curiosity strongly stirred. But outside, before the theatre, there was no sign of a gentleman awaiting an audience: only the people pouring on into the Academy.

"Around the corner," whispered the dark man hoarsely. "He dassen't wait here. Quick!"

Around the corner the pair hurried, Varney close in their wake. In the silent alley, half-hidden in the shadows of the building, stood a large carriage with a pair of strapping bays tugging at their traces. They halted before it, and the stranger, who had considerately taken Ryan's arm, flung open the door.

"Here he is, Jim — Mr. Ryan. Now you c'n tell him — "

The sentence died unended. At the same moment the sound of a violent scuffle smote the nocturnal air. It appeared that Jim, presumably laboring under an unfortunate misapprehension, had not received his visitor with that refined hospitality due from one gentleman to another. Even more inexplicable, it looked in the deceitful darkness, remarkably as though the boss's guide, suddenly dropping that gentleman's arm, had laid forcible hold upon his outraged and madly protesting legs.

It was all over in a minute. There was a faint yell,

quickly and violently muffled. Then the carriage door banged, leaving nobody on the sidewalk, and the horses, responding to an acutely painful lash from the strong arm on the box, sprang forward at the gallop.

Varney stood in the dark alley, looking after the vanishing carriage with mingled admiration and amazement. Swift footsteps sounded near him; and the next moment a strong hand seized him and pulled him back into the shadow of the wall.

"*Sh-h! It's me!* Anybody see it?"

"*Hello!* Not a soul but me."

Peter leaned against the wall and drew a deep breath.

"He can never prove it on me — not to save his soul! — *and I hold his meeting in the hollow of my hand.* Do you see that lighted window at the back there? That's my last bridge. Waiting in there are the chairman of the meeting and the mayor, who's the orator of the evening. I'm going in and make 'em take me on as one of the platform speakers. I'll pass out a few remarks and call on Hare — "

"But how will you make them — "

"They daren't refuse me anything," said Peter swiftly, and tapped his breast-pocket. "I've papers here that mean stripes for them both. Mind your eye, Larry, and be good!"

He disappeared through the little gate toward the dressing-room, where the officials of the meeting waited vainly for last instructions from their lord. Varney looked after him with a sigh. In Hunston

only twenty-four hours and already to be running the town!

He emerged from the alley feeling rather gloomy, and halted on the sidewalk in front of the theatre, idly watching the people as they poured in. The spectacle of this steady stream made a fitting background for his meditations; for he was thinking, absently, of the extreme boldness of Peter's course. Certainly, there was little here to suggest the quiet onlooker. But all at once something happened which checked the current of his thought as effectually as a slap upon the cheek.

In that shifting waste of strange faces, his vagrant eye suddenly fell upon a familiar one — two, three familiar ones — and his flagging interest sprang to life. There approached, side by side, J. Pinkney Hare, who, though few knew it, might prove the brilliant hero of the night's proceedings; the child, little Jenny Something, who had spent yesterday at the Carstairs house, leading strangers to think that she was somebody else; and Miss Carstairs herself, a fair flower in that moving tangle of weeds.

Hare saw Varney and bowed in his stiff affected way. But Varney 's eyes had already gone on to Miss Carstairs, and he did not return that greeting. Seeing the little candidate lift his hat, her look followed his, and so her eye met Varney's.

When this happened her expression did not change, except that, so he thought, she faintly colored. Varney awaited her bow; he half bowed himself: a stiff smile was ready on his lips. But he never gave it.

Her eyes rested full upon him for a second, with no sign of recognition, and then moved away; and the next moment she swept past him into the theatre.

There was no shadow of doubt about it. She who only last night had treated him with such marked kindness, had unmistakably cut him. It hardly seemed possible. Why, they had parted like friends!

But he understood instantly what had happened. To her, he was Ferris Stanhope; he himself had given her the right to think that. Since they had parted, some of that unpleasant gossip about Stanhope — of which she had known nothing last night — had made its way to her; and she had believed it as to him, Laurence Varney. Yes, she had believed it as to him. Peter was right, after all. A self-respecting girl owed it to herself, it seemed, not to recognize him. Curiously, so strong was his sense of the personal meaning of the insult that its more practical aspects for the moment altogether escaped him.

But that was only for the moment. In the next breath, it rushed over him that with that cool glance the luncheon engagement upon which his whole mission depended stood canceled; and with that thought he felt his will hardening into iron. What she thought of him, personally, was of course nothing; but no power should keep him from carrying through his plans precisely as he had arranged them. He elbowed his way into the lobby to find Uncle Elbert's daughter and make her retract that look.

But it gradually became evident that Uncle Elbert's

daughter was not in the lobby: the most systematic exploration failed to reveal any trace of her. In fact, it was certain that she had passed straight on to her seat within the hall; whence a loud roar presently gave warning to stragglers that the oratory had begun.

Two hours later Varney rose from his seat, at once marveling over the splendor of Peter's *coup* and bewildered by the blaze of publicity which it had turned upon his comrade and co-schemer. The well-laid plans had carried through to brilliant success, and Ryan's meeting had been converted into a triumph for Ryan's deadly enemy, J. Pinkney Hare.

The candidate had sat unobtrusively down in the audience with his friend Miss Carstairs and the child Jenny, — spectators all: that was the way they had arranged it. Peter, on the contrary, sat in the great white light of a front seat on the stage, where he had masterfully intruded himself in the galaxy of "other prominent citizens." And sure enough, when the set speeches were over, it was the honorable chairman who presented "a Mr. Maginnis of New York" to the meeting, doubtless having been satisfactorily convinced beforehand that it was to his advantage to do so. But, doubtless also convinced that there would be an accounting to his master for this night's work, he rose to his duty only after Mr. Maginnis had glared at him through a noticeable stage-wait, and then made the introduction as prejudicial as he dared.

Mr. Maginnis did not appear disconcerted in the

least. He began speaking with a pertinence and ease which rather surprised his friend Varney down in the audience, and with words which instantly let the dullest know that something unusual was taking place. However, he had not proceeded far when, the house having become very still, he was suddenly interrupted by a sharp hiss from the rear of the hall, and a raucous voice which shouted:

"Sit down, you! Nobody wants yer!"

Laughter followed and various murmurs, some approving, a few protesting. Ryan's good and faithful servants were evidently settling down to work.

Peter's eye roved over the audience, seemed to catch something and lit up with a faint signal.

"The gentleman who made that remark," he said in tones of great gentleness, "will kindly leave the hall at once."

A ripple of merriment ran through the crowd, breaking in many places into ostentatious guffaws. To those who knew the underside of those meetings, the mild request appeared so ineffectual as to be merely ridiculous. The honorable chairman, on the stage, hid a sinister smile behind his hand.

Then a strange thing happened. Four "ushers" moved silently down the side-aisle, halted at the end of the sixth row from the rear, laid hands upon an angry and wriggling little man who screamed to high heaven that he had n't done nothing, and dropped him out of the open window, which was just five feet above the ground.

It was rather a clean-cut piece of work, the moral

effect of which was in no wise weakened by the strong probability that they had ejected the wrong man. It proved the turning-point in the evening's proceedings. Ryanism seemed paralyzed by the mysterious absence of its chief, and a few further essays by the faithful, more and more half-hearted in their nature, made it plain that the control of that meeting had passed into other hands. Peter, apologizing for the little interruption, told simply but vividly how, coming to Hunston a stranger, he had instantly seen that something was badly wrong with the town: how he had looked about at the dirty streets, the dead business, the empty stores, the good men idling, the good wives suffering for the money that streamed into the big red saloon —

"That 's right!" called a shrill, scared woman's voice. "That 's right, Mister!"

"No!" Peter answered steadily. "It 's the *wrongest* thing that ever was — God help you poor women!"

Then a burst of hand-clapping, unforced by the faithful hirelings from New York, ran unexpectedly through the house.

Peter told how easy it had been to find out what was choking the life out of Hunston. His open countenance, democratic manners, and pungent speech produced a most favorable impression, and it was undeniable that, for the moment at least, he had the house with him when he swung into his peroration.

"You know we are told," he said, "that it is the

truth that makes us free. Well, you are going to hear the truth to-night, at last. There is a man listening to me at this moment who knows everything there is to be known. Like me, he has no axe to grind, no special interest to promote, no ambition but the manly wish to loose this town from the bonds with which a dishonest boss has shackled it. He has sacrificed much to the hope that he might help you, and for months he has been fighting against big odds, just to get a chance to tell you the facts. To-night he has got his chance, and you may be very sure that he will make the most of it.

"Relieving your honorable chairman of the trouble of rising for the purpose, I take pleasure in introducing to you Mr. J. Pinkney Hare, who is, with your consent, the next mayor of Hunston."

Back in the center of the house, a foot scraped upon the floor, and there was J. Pinkney Hare standing out in the aisle, his little black bag stuffed with documents swinging in his hand. And then there arose, to the surprise of everybody (barring those good fellows who had been well paid for their work and were earnestly determined to earn it) a deafening roar of applause, starting in the rear of the house, taken up at certain definite points all through it, and gradually spreading almost everywhere, many people joining in because they liked Peter greatly and others without having any idea why. The roar subsided a little as Hare drew near to the stage, mounted it, and deposited his little bag upon the table. Then it broke again, more loudly, as he came forward a step, looking out

upon the crowded house — he who could not hire a hall for himself — a little pale, a little awed by the bigness of his chance, but with neither tremor nor uncertainty on his small, cool face. . . .

Hare spoke for an hour and a half, and not a soul left the hall. It was impossible to call him off or cry him down: the plain sentiment of the house was, "Give the little man his show." Afterwards, Chairman Bates had made a desperate effort to overcome the damning effect of that address, calling on various Ryanites of aggressive manners, and making a second speech himself, but with little avail. Even the free fight which broke out during the distribution of the ice-cream of the Neapolitans (the announcement of which addition to the regular *menu* evoked the loudest spontaneous applause of the evening) resulted, until the police checked it, decidedly in favor of the strangers from New York.

This part of the evening's pleasures Varney did not see. He rose with many others when the published tidings of refreshment gave notice that the speech-making was over, and turned his face toward the door against a stream of ushers entering with alluring trays. Already all sense of the daring brilliance of Peter's stroke had faded and dropped from his mind. His own concerns crowded instantly upon his attention, and all his thought was of finding Mary Carstairs immediately and compelling her to recognize him for the man he was.

She, too, had risen to leave the hall. While he listened to the fierce philippic of J. Pinkney Hare, Var-

ney's eye had carefully marked her seat: it was empty now. Once, as he pushed his way slowly toward the door, he caught a brief glimpse of her over in the other aisle, some distance ahead of him; but he hardly saw her before she was lost to him again, swallowed up in the jostling throng. The theatre was in an uproar: all was noise and bustle and movement. And the wide lobby, when at length he reached it, was no better; it looked scarcely more promising to his quest than the traditional haystack to the searcher of needles.

Here were set the ice-cream freezers and the other paraphernalia of delight, and about them was a struggling mob. Varney circled the throng with a roving eye. Of the lady he saw no sign anywhere. But presently, on the outer fringe of the cohorts which stormed the freezers, he came upon the child Jenny, and knew that he had found a guide according to his heart's desire.

He touched her on the elbow. "Do you want to get some ice-cream?"

She turned her homely little face up towards him, and said shyly:

"Yes, sir. But they won't let me get near. And they say the chocolate is going fast."

"They 'll let me get near," said Varney heartily. "Chocolate is it, then? Lemonade, of course. And a thought of the cake with icing, shall we say? Good! But you 're not here alone, are you?"

"No, sir. I 'm here with Miss Mary — over there in that corner."

"Well, you just run over there with her and wait. Trust everything here to me."

He emerged from the ruck a few moments later, disheveled but triumphant. Hat under his arm and both hands heavily laden, he made a gingerly progress to the place of his tryst, a comparatively unpopulated corner near the door. And there she stood, her comely youth brought into sharp relief by her surroundings, side by side with the living hunger and thirst of Jenny, whose yearning eyes summoned the young man like a beacon.

Miss Carstairs happened to be looking in another direction. Varney, standing before her, calmly took up their acquaintance where he had left it last night at her mother's gate.

"Good evening, Miss Carstairs. I bear refreshment for your little friend. What a magnificent evening for Hare and Reform, is n't it?"

She turned, startled at the sound of his voice, looked at him, and looked at once away.

"Oh . . . yes, indeed. I — am waiting for Mr. Hare now. Jenny, are you sure you have n't seen him come out?"

"Yessum," said Jenny, her eyes all for the tall stranger.

Unable to resist their imploring appeal, he turned at once and delivered his burden.

"Ice-cream — lemonade —" he made inventory — "cake with icing — tin spoon — paper napkin in my pocket. Is there anything else?"

"I think," said Jenny, conscientiously, "there 's figs."

"You do not wish any figs to-night, Jenny," declared Miss Carstairs, rather more severely than mere figs seemed to warrant.

"*No'm!* I thought maybe he might want some."

"I doubt if I'll take any figs to-night, either," laughed Varney. "But may n't I get something for you, Miss Carstairs? I 'm happy to say that the chocolate is holding out better than we feared."

"Thank you," she said, apparently addressing the child, "I don't believe I wish anything."

Jenny here produced and handed around a small, rather dangerous-looking paper-bag, which proved, upon investigation, to contain marshmallows. Miss Carstairs declined. Varney, to show how unimpeachable he considered his standing with the party, gratefully accepted.

"I 'm afraid," he said, looking at Miss Carstairs, "that Mr. Hare's admirers are likely to detain him some time. If you don't care to wait so long, perhaps you would again give me the pleasure of supplanting him and taking you home — you and Miss — Miss Jenny?"

"No, thank you — I am sure he will be out soon . . . You look awfully trampled on and — mashed, Jenny," she continued, twitching the child's hat on straight. "And *my dear! Don't* eat so fast."

Despite himself, Varney felt his blood rising a little. "Miss Carstairs," he said slowly, "I must tell you that I came with Miss Jenny on purpose to see you. There is something that I wanted to say."

She raised her eyes then, and though their look was

very young and embarrassed, he felt himself lose something of his composure under it.

"You wanted to say something — to me?"

"A good deal. I have an explanation to make —"

"I 'm afraid that I have not time to — listen — Mr. Hare —"

"You must listen — to be fair," he said slowly. "I have to blame myself for it, but you are doing me an injustice at this moment. I am not — that man."

She made no answer. Beside them, Miss Jenny ate ice-cream succulently. All around them were people jostling this way and that, laughing, shouting: but they might have been alone on a mountain-top for all either was aware of them.

"Since I have been in Hunston — just a day," Varney said easily, "I seem to have done nothing but explain over and over that I am not Mr. Stanhope. I got awfully tired of it, Miss Carstairs; it seemed so horribly useless. Like the others, you insisted that I was he. You candidly did n't believe me —"

"No," she said, "that is true."

"I shall make you believe me now," said Varney.

A great hullabaloo suddenly arose around them. Four or five men broke pellmell, and for the most part backwards, out of the swing-doors, evidently ejected from within. A lonely-looking policeman, on guard at the entrance, charged them. The lobby was already thronged; now people retreating before that violent infusion of arms and legs crowded them close.

Varney, standing in front of Miss Carstairs, shielded her from the press, her capable buffer. Soon

he noticed that that part of the wall upon which she leaned was not a wall, but a door. He reached past her, turned the knob, revealed a brilliantly-lit little room.

"Ah! . . . A haven, Miss Carstairs."

She stepped backward, into the tiny box-office where Ryan had stood two hours before and cynically waited for his sport to begin. It was empty now, offering a perfect refuge. Varney followed and stood with his hand on the knob just inside the door.

"Thank you," said Miss Carstairs, breathing a little rapidly. "The meetings have never been as bad as this before. But — I must not lose sight of Jenny."

"I'm here, Miss Mary," gurgled an ice-creamy voice at the door.

"I think I had better wait outside after all," said Mary. "Mr. Hare will hardly know where to look for me."

"Miss Jenny will be his clew: he could n't miss her," said Varney. "Let me go on, while I have time. Miss Carstairs, it is not fair to either of us to let matters stay like this. In the cottage last night, you forced me to let you think I was — another man — "

"That is absurd," she said. "How could I possibly force you to say what was not — the fact?"

"Did I really say anything that was not — the fact? I tried particularly not to. But I did let you deceive yourself about it: that is quite true and I'm sorry. I did it because — well, because if I had n't done it, you were not going to let me walk home with you."

She leaned against the little desk at which the Academy man sat to sell tickets, and hesitated, almost imperceptibly. "Then why," she asked, "should you wish to *undeceive* me now?"

"You know why," he answered. "If I don't, something tells me that you are not going to speak to me any more."

Her silence conceded the truth of this. It began to be evident how difficult he had made matters for himself.

Varney laughed. "I am determined to make you believe me, yet just how am I to go about it? It 's rather an absurd position, when you come to think of it — this arguing with somebody as to who one is. Suppose I were that fellow, Miss Carstairs. How could I possibly hope to come back to my old home-town and persuade people to believe that I am somebody else?"

Her eyes had wandered out through the little grated window, and she made no reply.

"You see how preposterous that would be. A mere resemblance is not enough to condemn a man upon, Miss Carstairs."

She turned her head with a sudden gesture of annoyance. "What difference can it possibly make whether I speak to you or not, Mr. St — "

"*Don't!*" he interrupted swiftly. "You know my name. You shall not call me by that one."

Hare's neat pink face appeared at the ticket-window, for all the world like a belated theatre-goer, anxious for several in the orchestra.

"Ah, Mary! There you are! Whenever you are ready — "

"I have been waiting for you a long time," said Miss Carstairs. "It was so splendid, Mr. Hare! Is Jenny there? We 'll go at once."

She turned to Varney, cool as a dewy rose, and came forward a short step. "I — I must say this before I go: has no one told you that you are in danger here? "

Under her tone and her look, his plan of being the easy master of the situation grew increasingly difficult. "Everybody has told me," he said rather shortly. "It 's gotten to be a bore."

"Then — won't you — won't you please go away before — anything happens? "

"I am going on Thursday afternoon," he answered, stung by her beauty, which was so remote, and by the sudden compassion in her voice. "My engagements will keep me here till that day, you remember? I promise you, since you are so good as to interest yourself in the matter, that I shall leave Hunston directly after that — "

"Your engagements on Thursday? " she repeated, looking away. "Are — you speaking of — "

"The luncheon on my yacht. We are inviting Mr. Hare and his sister to meet you."

"I am sorry," began Miss Carstairs, not looking at him, "but — I — I find that I shall n — "

"Er — Mary? " said the candidate's voice through the window.

She turned toward the door at once, as though welcoming a summons which so opportunely relieved her

from embarrassing explanations: but Varney, who happened to have duties to her father to discharge, stood before her, not moving.

"Just now in the theatre," he said pleasantly, "you cut me. That was for him. I understood. But is there any valid reason why you should not stay on speaking terms with — Laurence Varney?"

To his surprise, a vivid red swept up her face from throat to hair and her eyes fluttered and fell.

"Please," she said, "don't ask me to discuss this any more."

Varney stood aside, bowing, to let her pass out.

"I shall bring you proofs of my identity to-morrow, since that seems necessary," he said with a laugh. "You won't refuse to see me, if you care anything about being fair. But shall I tell you something, Miss Carstairs? In your heart *you believe me now!*"

At the outer door, Varney all but collided with a man listlessly entering, and, glancing up, saw that it was the pale young editor, Coligny Smith.

"I hope you enjoyed the meeting," flung out Varney in passing.

"Why, greetings — greetings!" said Mr. Smith, a mocking smile on his thin lips. "I've just been out to buy your picture, Beany."

With which singular rejoinder, he slipped by into the lobby.

J. Pinkney Hare lingered some time in the theatre after Miss Carstairs joined him, enveloped in a heartening whirl of new popularity. To the candidate it

seemed that his star had changed with stunning swiftness. His advance to the door had been a Roman progress; and when he finally reached the lobby he was still the focus of a coterie of enthusiasts who would not be shaken off. Here a new halt was made: new people surrounded him; more hand-shakings and back-slappings took place; and everything seemed merry as a marriage-bell.

But Peter, coming out of the hall a moment after Varney had left, saw hovering about this intimate circle an elderly man of a faded exterior and shabby clothes, who wore a black felt hat pulled down over wary-looking eyes. Even at that moment of splendid triumph, Peter was annoyed to recognize in him the man Higginson, of whose too friendly interest in the candidate's doings he had complained to Varney a few hours earlier. Whether he was, in truth, the man who had followed them on the street the night before, he was not ready to make affidavit. But undoubtedly there was something furtive in the man's appearance and manner; and Peter, watching him from the door,was highly irritated to see Hare present the fellow to Miss Carstairs, who smiled on him as upon one of her friend's good friends.

"The sneak!" thought Peter. "I'll just drop him a quiet hint to butt out before he gets hurt."

But his "head-usher" due to vanish back to New York by the ten-forty-five claimed him just then for a business talk, and when Peter had time to think of Mr. Higginson again, he found that the man had disappeared.

CHAPTER X

THE EDITOR OF THE GAZETTE PLAYS A CARD FROM HIS SLEEVE

Varney slept badly. The night was long, like art and the lanes that have no turning; and interludes punctuated it, now and again, when he lay wide-eyed in his bunk, staring into the darkness. At these times without exception, he thought how, early in the morning, he would climb the hill to the white house, blandly proffering letters to show that he was no cad, no cur, but Laurence Varney, whom ladies need not flee from as from the plague; suavely putting Uncle Elbert's daughter so utterly in the wrong that he himself would grow merciful towards her abashment, and sorry.

He fell asleep, woke again, rehearsed once more what he would say to her. At last he saw the dawn break along the horizon and the gray of a new day meet and mingle with the receding darkness. It was Wednesday. To-morrow would be Thursday, and he could go away, his business done. The prospect was rich recompense for everything. It came to him, suddenly and for the first time, that he hated his mission in Hunston with a disheartening and sickening hatred. And formulating this thought, polishing it to aphorism and sharpening it to epigram, he slumbered and slept for the last time that night.

But on the heels of the morning came Peter, bursting in half-dressed, a newspaper flaunting in his hand, an unfastened suspender flapping behind him like a pennant on a clubhouse.

"Oh, you're awake, are you?" said he, looking very keen and wide-awake himself. "Good! You'd hardly want to be dead to the world while this kind of thing is going on."

Varney, on an elbow, sleepily surprised at this vehemence, said: "What's up?"

"The jig!" cried Peter succinctly. "At least it looks that way. It's that rascal Smith."

He sat down on the edge of Varney's bunk, the folded newspaper in his hand, and continued: "I ran out before I was dressed to look at this contemptible *Gazette,* because I wanted to see how they handled the meeting last night. But the minute I picked it up, I saw this, and — well, by George! Look at it!"

He whipped open the *Gazette* with a movement which all but shredded it and thrust it into Varney's hand. Varney sat up in bed and smoothed it out upon the coverlet.

Coligny Smith was clever and his eye ranged wide. He saw all the chances that there were, and what he saw he made the most of. For his front-page "picture feature" that morning, he had selected a two-column half-tone of a good-looking, though not altogether pleasant-faced young man; and beneath it had indited in bold capitals which the most casual eye could not miss: "Mr. Ferris Stanhope, Author and Former Hunstonian, Who Has Just Arrived in Town."

"I see," said Varney, slowly. "Meaning me."

Beside the portrait ran a "story," which said in part:

"It leaked out yesterday that the 'mysterious stranger' who suddenly appeared off Hunston in an elegant private yacht on Monday night, is none other than Ferris Stanhope, well-known author of novels of the pink-tea type. . . .

"Mr. Stanhope is a native of Hunston, and is well remembered here. As the result of certain escapades which need not be detailed in a home paper like the *Gazette,* he left town, somewhat hurriedly, one night twelve years ago. Until Monday he has never been back since. The news of his arrival has not been received with general expressions of pleasure. Predictions were freely made about the streets yesterday that if certain old and respected citizens of Hunston should chance to meet the author, trouble is sure to arise.

"Why Mr. Stanhope should have elected to come back to Hunston has not yet been ascertained. Some say that it is the result of a bet, friends having wagered that he would not venture to return for a month's stay here. These declare that he is using the yacht as base of operations to reconnoiter and determine whether it is safe to land. Color is lent to this theory by the pains which the distinguished author is taking to conceal his identity. The name of the yacht has been carefully erased, and he is using, it is said, an assumed name.

"The secret of Mr. Stanhope's identity came out too late last night for the *Gazette* to obtain an interview. With him on the yacht is a 'Mr. Maginnis,' representing himself as a wealthy New Yorker and a 'student of government.' Both gentlemen, it is said, are claimed as allies by Hunston's new 'Reform party.'"

Peter broke out the moment Varney laid down the paper, but Varney, staring absently out of the port-hole, did not listen. This, then, was the meaning of the pale young editor's enigmatical remark last night. Here was no idle malice. Diabolically resourceful and without shame, young Mr. Smith had circulated this lie to discredit reform and drive off its new champion. And this was the way that he, Varney, had kept the coming of the *Cypriani* quiet in Hunston!

"And think of the cursed bull luck of it!" cried Peter. "The most the rascal hoped to do was to ruin my plans for helping Hare by these dirty hints about both of us — at the best to scare us away from Hunston. He never dreamed that he was knocking the bottom out of any private plans of *yours!*"

Varney stretched and yawned. "Well, he is n't."

"Doubtless I am a stupid ass and all that," said Peter, staring, "but with the *Gazette* publishing it about the countryside that you are a yellow dog of the worst nature, I don't grasp how you expect Miss Carstairs to come on this yacht and lunch with you."

A knock sounded on the stateroom door, and McTosh entered, announcing two telegrams for Mr. Varney.

Varney, wondering a little who had known his whereabouts, took the yellow envelopes, nodded to the steward not to wait, broke them open, read the typewritten words within, read them again.

Then he looked up and found Peter gazing at him more or less expectantly.

Varney laughed. "Do you remember that night at

the club my saying to you, as a great inducement: 'Suppose the New York papers get on to this'?"

Peter nodded.

Varney handed him the yellow slips; then he arose and pushed the service button.

"McTosh," he said, "send to town at once and get me copies of the *Sun,* the *Times,* the *Daily* and the *Herald* — all the New York papers. No, go yourself, and don't stay longer than is absolutely necessary."

Peter, meantime, with a heart beating as it had not beat the night before when he had overthrown Ryan and stolen his meeting, was reading the following:

Daily story has got us all guessing. If it's really you, what the devil are you up to, anyway?

R. E. Townes.

The other was in a similar vein:

Alarming story in *Daily* to-day. Absolute secrecy a prerequisite as explained. Reporters tried to reach me to-night. Trust you fully, but implore you to proceed with utmost caution.

Elbert Carstairs.

"The plot thickens," said Peter when Varney turned back, "till I, for one, can't see the drift. However — you've sent for the *Daily?*"

Varney nodded. "I told him to get three or four others, too, for a blind."

"Politics," said Peter, in his calmest fighting manner, "is all off. I'm not the least interested in it. We'll give the morning to studying yellow journalism. But about Miss Carstairs. How can you possibly —"

"By heaven," said Varney, with a sudden burst of anger, "I'll make her know who I am, if I have to drag in her own mother to introduce me."

He went off to his bath, dressed hurriedly, dawdled a moment at the breakfast-table, where he found Peter discussing a cereal not without a certain solemn pleasure, and went above grappling with the thought that all this would mean a postponement of his call at the Carstairs house, and maybe something more serious still. The morning was sunny and crisp. He walked to the bow, briskly, by way of a constitutional, turned and started down again. As he did this, his eye fell upon a strange figure which had at first escaped him. Toward the stern of the *Cypriani,* near the wheel, a little runt of a boy hung over the rail, and made the air noxious with the relicts of a low-born cigar. He was an aged, cynical boy, with a phlegmatic mien and a face of the complexion and general appearance of a hickory-nut.

A little surprised by the sudden apparition, Varney came down the deck and dropped into a chair near him.

"Well, my lad! I'm happy to see you and your cigar again. But to what do we owe the pleasure of this call from you two old friends?"

The boy turned his back to the rail and faced him impassively. In the brilliant sunshine, he looked singularly worn and wise.

"I brung dem wires," he said courageously plying the cigar. "Any answer?"

"I'll see, after a while," said Varney, hastily lighting a pipe as counter-irritant. "So you're the telegraph boy, are you?"

"Nawser. Odjobbin' I do. Anythink as comes handy. They don't deliver no wires down here. I handles 'em sometimes for wut dere is in it."

"Oh! Well, I won't fail to see that there is something in it for you this time. And do you make much money odd-jobbing?"

"I git along awright. Summertimes I do. Wintertimes there ain't no odjobbin' much."

"How old are you, my boy?"

"Twelve year old."

"Twelve! I thought you were sixteen, at least."

A faint look of gratification crossed the boy's face, but he only said stoically: "Twelve year 's my age."

"What do you do in the wintertime when there is n't much odd-jobbing? How do you get along then?"

"I git along awright. Sometimes I git help. Off a lady here, a frien' o' mine."

"What lady? What 's her name?"

"Name o' Miss Mary. Miss Carstair, some calls her. I git money and clo's off her. I 'd 'a' had some bum winters, had n't ben for her."

There was a pause, and then Varney said: "What 's your name, my boy?"

Again the boy hesitated. "Tommy," he said presently.

"Tommy what?"

"Tommy — Orrick."

Varney started. Of all the sordid Hunston of the natives, that was the one name which meant anything to him. It was rather a curious coincidence.

"Then I suppose old Sam Orrick," he said kindly, "is your father's father."

"Nawser," he answered slowly. And he added presently, "He wuz me mudder's father."

After that, the silence lengthened. Varney looked off down the river. Tommy Orrick, whose father was named something else, clapped his hand suddenly to his lip, because his cigar just then scorched it unbearably.

"What is your father's name, Tommy?" asked Varney, in a low voice.

His back toward Varney, his fragment of a cigar poised, reluctantly ready to drop, the boy shook his head. "I don't rightly know," he said in his husky little voice.

But Varney knew that name: and he said it now slowly over to himself in a dull and futile anger.

From the shore a boat put out hurriedly and the faithful steward came flying over the water with meritorious speed. With him he was bringing the papers that might settle the *Cypriani's* mission, but Varney, for the moment, hardly gave him a thought. His own affairs were blotted from his mind just then by the tragedy of the little waif before him, luckless victim of another's sin, small flotsam which barely weathered the winters when odd-jobbing was scarce, and only one lady cared.

"Where do you live, Tommy?"

"Kerrigan's loft mostly — w'en Kerrigan ain't dere."

"This morning," said Varney rapidly, "I 'm just

as busy as a bee. But this afternoon, or to-morrow morning anyway, I want to come down to Kerrigan's and call on you."

"Wut about?" the boy demanded with an instant suspiciousness which was rather pathetic.

"About you, Tommy. I have got a little plan in my head, and there is n't any time to talk about it now. What would you say to having a home with some nice people I know in another city — in New York?"

A sudden dumbness seized Tommy. His head slowly lowered and he did not answer. Around the deck-house from the port-side hurried McTosh, his arm embracing a bundle of papers, his brow beady with the honest toil of speed wrung out of country paths.

"Ah, steward! You made good time. Ask Mr. Maginnis if he won't come on deck when he is at leisure. Thomas, you 're for the shore, are n't you? Forward, there!"

He got up and stood by the side of grave little Tommy Orrick, who was staring silently down at the white deck.

"Down in New York, Tommy, I know a nice woman who has a home and no boys at all to put in it. A long time ago she used to be the nurse of a boy I knew, but he grew up; and now her husband 's dead and she 's all alone. And here in Hunston is a boy with no home to put himself in. That 's you, Tommy, and I — but here 's your boat. I 'll come to see you to-morrow at Kerrigan's — sure, and we 'll talk it all over. Good-bye. And remember that you and I are just the best friends going."

He held out his hand, to shake, but Tommy, in an excess of stage-fright at the unwonted ceremonial, nimbly turned his back; and the next instant he slipped over the rail like an acrobat and dropped into the waiting dinghy. Safely there, he glanced tentatively upward; but seeing that the tall man above was still standing at the rail and was smiling down upon him, looked tactfully away again. And Varney heard him say to the oarsman in a snappy, impatient voice: "Pull for all you know, dere! I got bizness dat won't keep."

Varney sat down with the bundle of papers. Within the minute, Peter appeared, replete but characteristically alert.

"Read it yet?"

"No, but I 've found it. It was n't hard."

He handed Peter the paper, his thumb crooked to indicate the place, which was superfluous; for near the middle of the front page, top of column and in the strong type of captions, the words leaped out to Peter's eye as though hand-illumined in many colors:

FERRIS STANHOPE OR
LAURENCE VARNEY

Mystery Surrounding Young Man On Yacht Near Hunston.

He Says He 's Varney — Natives say He 's Stanhope and Trouble Feared — Yacht is Elbert Carstairs's, with Her Name Painted Out — Mr. Varney's Movements Unknown to Friends Here.

Peter read the story aloud in a guarded undertone. In general, it closely followed the story in the *Gazette;* so closely indeed as to show at a glance that both productions came from one brain and pen. But toward the end, the new story took a different turn. It said:

"The above is a sample of the gossip which is agitating this usually quiet little town. Late to-night there are two distinct factions. One holds that the young 'stranger' is Ferris Stanhope, reconnoitring under an *alias.* The other contends that he is really Laurence Varney, or somebody else, up here on some secret mission. Unless the stranger leaves town before, the facts will doubtless be brought out to-morrow. The gossips promise that a sensation of no mean order is forthcoming."

Below this, some one in the *Daily* office had added:

"A certain air of mystery surrounds Laurence Varney's recent movements. At his bachelor apartments, in the Arvonia, it was learned last night that Mr. Varney was out of the city, but the man-servant there had no idea of his master's whereabouts. From other sources, however, it was learned that Mr. Varney left New York several days ago on the *Cypriani,* a handsome steam yacht belonging to Elbert Carstairs of No. 00 Fifth Avenue. An attempt was made to reach Mr. Carstairs at his home, but the hour was late, and he could not be interviewed. A telegram sent to Ferris Stanhope's last known address, Camp Skagway in the Adirondacks, was unanswered up to the hour of going to press."

Peter let the paper drop upon his knees, and whistled rather shamefacedly. Here was a pretty kettle of fish indeed, and it was all of his brewing. If he had kept his fingers out of the affairs of Hunston, as both his enemy and his friend had warned him to do, the unscrupulous editor would have had no interest in attacking him, over his captain's shoulders, and this damaging story would never have been concocted and spread broadcast as a feast for gossips. He had been brought to Hunston to help Varney — and here was the front-page result.

If a similar thought flashed across Varney's mind in this disturbing moment, he instantly forgot it for others more practical. He sat curled up in a folding deck-chair, swiftly weighing what this new issue might mean, and a moment of rather heavy silence ensued.

The cat was all but out of the bag: this fatal hint at "some secret mission" made that plain. A little carelessness, some more shrewd probing into his affairs, and the jig would be up, indeed. This was the one way that their enemies in Hunston could interfere with him — insisting on knowing why he had come there; and Coligny Smith had had the bull luck, as Peter put it, to stumble on it.

Thus it fell out that he, Varney, who had needed to seek the dark and unobtrusive ways, found himself thrust suddenly into the full glare of the calcium. He who was guarding an errand which nobody should know about was now to be asked by everybody who read newspapers just what that errand was.

It was so absurd that all at once he laughed aloud. However, it was becoming quite serious, and he saw that, too.

"Damn him!" broke out Peter, compactly, and he added presently: "Think of his throwing a bomb in the air like that, and smoking out poor old Carstairs!"

Varney looked up, knocked out his pipe against his heel, and restored it thoughtfully to his pocket. "Yes. Did you notice the difference between those two stories? He does n't want Hunston even to suspect that I may be myself. His game here is to *know* I 'm Stanhope, whom the whole town is sore on. In New York, he tries both stories, not knowing which will hurt the most. However, theories will keep. The facts are plain. They 've started out to run us down — that 's all. The point is now to decide what we are going to do about it."

He stood up, tall and cool, his jaw shut tightly, his brow puckered into a long frown, thinking rapidly.

"As I see it," he said slowly, "it works about like this. Probably the *Gazette* is the local news bureau for this town. At any rate, it is evident that somebody on it is the correspondent of the *Daily*. The *Gazette,* we know, wants to run you out of town in order to have a free hand in slaughtering Hare. Last night they supposed that my looking like Stanhope was the best card they had. This morning they will guess that there may be a still better one lying around somewhere. The *Daily* tells them that I 'm Varney, and, what is much more interesting, that I 'm using Elbert

Carstairs's yacht. Mrs. Elbert Carstairs lives in Hunston. Putting two and two together, and adding the painted-out name and a dash of seeming furtiveness on my part, you have all the materials for a nice, yellow mystery. I have n't the slightest doubt that when that telegraph editor in New York gets down to his office about one o'clock to-day, the very first thing he does, after hanging his coat on the nail, is to wire his correspondent to begin operating on me."

Peter nailed the alternative. "If he does n't, the *Gazette* will attend to the job, anyway."

"Yes, the press is on our trail, in any case. The fact that this is the Carstairs yacht will mean more to the *Gazette* than it could to the *Daily*. It will be a kind of connecting link for them. Of course, they 'll jump at it like wildfire. If they can make anything at all out of it, they 'll play it up to-morrow so that nobody in this town can possibly miss seeing it."

"Pray heaven," said Peter, referring to Mary Carstairs, "that she won't see the *Daily* this morning!"

"Yes. Her father's name would naturally start her to thinking, which would make things awkward."

"Larry, the *Gazette* is going to print his name tomorrow morning as sure as Smith is a lying sneak."

"We 've still got to-day, have n't we? By Jove, it 's nearly eleven already. A reporter may be down on us at almost any minute. We can't stand being cross-examined. No searchlight of journalism playing about on the *Cypriani* just now, thank you. My own idea is —"

"To grab him, to batter the face off him —"

"No, to elude him. Not to be here. In short, to run away."

"*What?* You can't mean that you are going to let that dog drive you back to New York?"

"Well, hardly. But I do mean to make him think he has! I mean to run down the river a few miles and anchor where they can't find us, simply to get out of the way. Then we 'll run back to-morrow in time for the luncheon. What do you think of that?"

Peter, his forehead rumpled like a corduroy road, stared at him fixedly and thought it over. "I think it 's the best thing in sight," he said judicially. "An exceedingly neat little idea."

"If we 're being watched, it may persuade them that we 've gone. Anyway, it will give us time to decide what next," said Varney. And he hurried off to confer with the sailing-master.

Presently the engine-room bell rang out a signal. Orders were given and repeated above and below. Men began moving about swiftly. The noise of coal scraped hurriedly out of bunkers smote the air. The *Cypriani's* hold throbbed with sudden life.

Varney, running hastily through the two newspaper stories again to make sure that they had missed nothing that might be important to them, was presently joined by Peter, who was looking at his watch every third minute and swearing softly every time he looked. Something had been discovered amiss with the machinery, it seemed. The captain was sure he would have the plaguy thing all right in another half-hour, but you never could tell. For his part he 'd swear that

a yacht was worse than an old-style motor car: you could absolutely count on her to be out of order at any moment when you positively had to have her.

To be delayed until somebody appeared to challenge their going was to lose half the battle. Varney went off to the sailing-master and spoke with him again, concisely. The sailing-master, a sensitive man to criticism, once more apologized, very technically, and redoubled his energies. He went below himself to superintend the repairs and to prod the laggards to their utmost endeavors. In less than three quarters of an hour, by Peter's watch, he was up again, in a shower of falling perspiration, to announce that all was ready.

However, valuable moments had been lost. It was now nearly half-past twelve, or, in Peter's indignant summary, "just an hour and a half too late."

Varney glanced toward the bridge.

"All ready there?" he called.

"All ready, sir," said the sailing-master, and sprang for the indicator.

"Hold on," said Peter suddenly. "We're getting visitors. There's some one signaling us from the shore."

Varney's heart bounded. He turned with an exclamation; but in the next breath, he ordered: "Let her go, Ferguson."

Upon the shore, at the spot where the *Cypriani's* boat ordinarily landed, stood a tallish, stocky young man, looking at them cheerfully and swabbing his brow with a large blue handkerchief. Catching Var-

ney's eye, he waved his hand with the handkerchief in it, and said, for the second time:

"Hello, aboard the *Cypriani!*"

Varney stepped to the rail, a faint smile on his lip. "Hello, there! What can we do for you?"

"Hot as merry hell, is n't it?" said the young man pleasantly. "Send a boat over for me, will you? I 'm Hammerton, of the *Gazette* and the New York *Daily,* and I want to come aboard for a little talk."

"Never in this world!" breathed Peter, *sotto voce.*

Varney smiled, grimly. "Sorry, Mr. Hammerton. You 're just too late. We are starting away from Hunston this very minute."

The *Cypriani* shuddered like a live thing and slid slowly forward.

CHAPTER XI

WHICH SHOWS THE HERO A FUGITIVE

Four miles downstream, the river's banks grew a long mile apart, and the scenery was lonesome and a little wild. Here, as it chanced, there was flung across the water a thin, rocky island, well-wooded and of a respectable length. It lay nearest the western shore; and not a hamlet or even a house, it seemed, commanded it from either side.

They recognized it from afar as ideal anchorage for a yacht which wanted to be let alone. So they slowed down into the island's curving shore and dropped anchor in the lee of it, out of sight of the Hunston side of the river and in little evidence from any point in midstream above or below.

Securely hidden from the probing eye of the press, they were now in something of a quandary as to what their next step should be. The hour set for the luncheon, upon which their mission hung, was only twenty-four hours away: and they had no idea whether the guest of honor intended to come or stay away. Varney was torn between the necessity of keeping clear of reporters, and the even more pressing necessity of calling upon Mary Carstairs. If to go to town was a risk, not to go to town was a much greater one.

They finally decided that Peter should go to Hunston first, at once and alone. He would walk in, lest the use of the *Cypriani* boat should betray them; and there take charge of the situation and see what could be done.

"You sit tight," Peter urged, "and give me a chance at it first. The *Gazette* has got nothing on me, you know; they can camp on my shirt-tail till they get good and tired. Meantime, I 'll spread it around that you 've gone away and that I 'm hanging on a day or two longer to help Hare. You only came on a pleasure trip, and all these sensational lies spoiled your pleasure: so you pulled out. That 's plausible and reasonably true, you see. Then I 'm going to find that fellow Hammerton and try to bluff him off."

"How?"

"I 'd much like to give him money, but it 's never safe to try that with reporters. Oh, I 'll hobnob with the fellow, hand him cigars, jolly him along about the neat way they got revenge on us for the meeting, and sort of take it for granted that the incident ended when they chased you away from town. If he seems dubious and acts as if he meant to work on the 'secret mission' idea just the same, I 'll go in and call on Coligny Smith. Oh, I 'm not going to hit him. If I had n't known that would be the worst possible tactics, I 'd have gone uptown at nine o'clock this morning and yanked him out of bed by his long, lying ears. I 'm only going to talk to him in a kindly way. He told us himself that he was out for the hard money, you know."

"All right," said Varney.

Peter hesitated. "You 've *got* to go in, I suppose? It 's hard luck. Here we are working overtime to build up the popular idea that you 've quit and gone back to New York. It 'll be deuced awkward if that reporter nabs you the minute you set foot in Hunston."

"I 've got to risk it. I 'll wait a while, though, and give them a chance to drop the trail. And when I do go in, I 'm not going with a brass band."

"There 's not the least hurry," said Peter. "You 've got all the rest of the day — to-morrow morning, too, for that matter. Wait here till you hear from me, will you? Maybe I can turn up something which will save you from having to go in at all."

Varney grinned. "Remember yesterday, Peter? — when you were coming back at ten o'clock and came at four? No more unlimited contracts from me. It is twenty minutes past one now. You can get in by two thirty if you hustle. I must start in by half-past four. It would n't be safe to wait any longer."

"Give me a show, will you? Make it five, anyway."

"Five, then. If you 're not back on the dot, in I start for my call. Till we meet again."

Peter started down the stair, hesitated, turned and came back again. "Larry," he said, with sudden gruffness, "of course, we 've both been thinking that if it had n't been for me, none of this mess would have happened. I kick myself when I think — "

"Drop it, Peter. Nobody in the world could have foreseen — "

"Every ass in the United States," said Maginnis,

his ponderous foot on the ladder, "could have foreseen it but me. I just want you to know that politics is absolutely sidetracked now. Before I 'll let this deal of ours fall through, I 'll see Hare licked till they can't scrape him together afterward with a fine-tooth comb."

It was deadly quiet on the yacht after Peter left. At two o'clock Varney went down to a solitary luncheon. At quarter past, followed by the reproachful gaze of McTosh, he came out again. In the pit of his stomach reposed a great emptiness, but it was not hunger. He felt restless, high-strung, all made of nerves. He wanted to do something of a violent, physical sort, the more grueling the better; and his task was to loll in an easy-chair under a pretty awning and inspect the landscape.

The port side of the *Cypriani* was jammed as close into the island as the science of navigation made possible. Varney went over to the other side and sat down to wait. In front of him, a hundred yards away, the western bank rose abruptly from the water's edge, reaching here and there to loftiness. There were woods upon it, thick and silent, which looked as if the defiling hand of man had never entered there. At his back was the still, empty little island; at either side stretched the deserted river.

He thought it as lonely a spot as could have been found in a day's journey, but a moment later he discovered his mistake. It was suddenly borne in upon him that the tall, thin object which nestled so closely among the trees a mile to the south that it was scarcely distinguishable from them, was in reality the spire of

some church; and he knew that he was much closer to his kind than he had thought.

And then, in time, he noticed other things. Before a great while, he saw a boat with one person in it — a woman he thought — put out from the shore at about where the village must be and start across to the other bank. And later, as the afternoon wore on, he caught sight of a canoe, a few hundred yards upstream, rocking idly down with the current. An elderly-looking man sat in it, with a short brown beard and sun-goggles showing under his soft hat — for the water burned under a brilliant sky — stolidly fishing and reading a book. He looked like a rusticating college professor — of Greek, say — and this theory seemed to be supported by his obvious ignorance as to how to keep a canoe on the popular side of the water.

And later still a rowboat came swinging briskly up the quiet channel where the yacht lay and passed her at fifty yards. A man and a woman sat in it, presumably bound for Hunston, and they stared at the hidden, detected *Cypriani* with a degree of frank interest which suggested that they would not fail to mention the strange sight to every acquaintance they met in town.

"That 's the beauty about a yacht," thought Varney, annoyed. "You might as well try to hide an elephant in a hall room."

But his mind soon strayed from the pair of bumpkins and went off to other and more pressing matters. He had now, not one great difficulty to meet and overcome, but two. One of them was to make Uncle

Elbert's daughter keep her engagement with him. The other was to prevent the *Gazette* from linking the name of the *Cypriani* with the name of Carstairs to-morrow morning. About the first of these he allowed himself no doubts. If the worst came to the worst, he would turn to Mrs. Carstairs. Brutal it might be to compel the mother to introduce the kidnapper to his quarry, her daughter; but that was no fault of his. He would do his duty by Mrs. Carstairs's husband, no matter who got hurt. Miss Carstairs should come to the *Cypriani* to-morrow as she had promised. In heaven or earth, on land or sea, there was no power which should keep him from having his will there.

But then there was the *Gazette*. Smith, the clever, would doubt that the *Cypriani* had really gone back to New York. Suppose, since he could not find her, he would venture a few shrewd guesses in his paper to-morrow morning connecting that "secret mission" the *Daily* had mentioned with Mrs. Elbert Carstairs. Miss Carstairs would see what the *Gazette* said; and what questions would she have to ask him before she would come as his guest to the yacht? . . .

A ripple of water fell across the young man's thought, and he glanced up. The college professor, whom the current had washed much nearer now, fancying, it appeared, that he had got a bite, had suddenly thrown himself far over the edge of his canoe, stretching his rod to the farthest reach. The slender birch-bark tipped so violently that even he noticed it; and the next instant, he sprang back again, rocking at a great rate.

"Simpleton!" thought Varney. "He will go over in a minute. . . ."

Now her face rose before him as he had seen it first last night at Stanhope's cottage, radiant as a dream come true — looking at him and saying: "I'd like it very much if you could just trust *me!*" And he saw her again when she had looked at him, eye to eye over the many heads before the theatre, with only blank unrecognition in her glance, or had there been, after all, a sort of latent sorrowfulness there? And then he saw her once more, as she stood in the little box-office, her cheeks suddenly stained red, when she begged him, please, not to ask her to discuss it any more. . . .

A sudden sharp thought came to him, putting all his imaginings to flight, a thought so vital and so obvious that it was incredible that it had not once crossed his mind before. If the *Gazette* doubted that he had returned to New York, if it was still on his trail and still wanted to embarrass him, *it would send a man straight to Mrs. Carstairs.*

How could he possibly have overlooked that? With the secret of the *Cypriani's* ownership out, of course that would be the first thing Smith would think of: to ask Mrs. Carstairs what had brought her husband's yacht to Hunston. And when the reporter went, who could say what damaging admission he might surprise out of the poor lady, or at the least what inklings to hang diabolical guesses upon? Worst of all, he might see Miss Carstairs herself — awaken no one knew what suspicions in her already perplexed mind.

He sprang up and glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes past four. Every minute had become precious now, and waiting for Peter was of course not to be thought of. While he loitered ineffectually here, Coligny Smith, four miles away, might be doing his plans the irremediable injury. And he started for the cabin swiftly to get his hat.

But there came an interruption which stopped him short. A quick loud splashing and sudden cries arose from the water near at hand; and he divined instantly what had happened. The college professor, like the ass he was, had upset his canoe.

Varney halted, strode back to the rail. The professor came up spluttering, blowing quarts of water from his mouth and nose, making feeble strokes with his ineffective, collegiate arms.

"Help!" he called in a thin watery voice. "Help! I can't swim." Whereon, he immediately bobbed under again.

Of course, there was nothing to do but accede to that request.

"Lay hold of the canoe," called Varney impatiently, when the poor fellow reappeared. "I 'll send a boat down for you."

There had been no chance of his drowning: for the overturned canoe was staunch, and floated, a splendid life-belt, not a foot away from him. At Varney's word, he seized hold of it feebly, with both hands. The crew were quick. One or two of them had been watching the madman's antics for some time, it appeared; and they had a boat down and over to him in no time.

Sopping with water, dripping it from his clothes and his hair and his brown academic beard, a dazed and pitiable-looking object, he came up the ladder not without nimbleness, and stepped through the gangway upon the deck.

Varney took it that his own duties in the matter were now at an end. "Hold your places," he called to the boat crew. "I shall need you myself at once."

Then he turned hurriedly to the man he had rescued, who stood silently on the deck, wringing cups of water from the skirts of his black cutaway coat.

"I 'll have them bring you dry clothes," he said swiftly, "and anything else you need. You 'll excuse me? I am compelled to — "

But at that he stopped dead; for the brown beard of the college professor suddenly loosened and fell upon the deck. The professor, not at all discomposed by the extraordinary accident, kicked it carelessly to one side, and pitching his large hat and goggles after it, faced Varney with a jovial smile.

"You don't happen to have a thimble-full of red-eye about, do you, Mr. Varney?" he asked chattily. "I 'm Hammerton, of the *Gazette* and the *Daily,* you know, and that river down there is *wet.*"

CHAPTER XII

A YELLOW JOURNALIST SECURES A SCOOP BUT FAILS TO GET AWAY WITH IT

Garbed in a suit of Varney's clothes, warmed beneath his belt by a libation from the *Cypriani's* choicest stock, eased as to his person by a pillow beneath his head and a comfortable rest for his feet, Charlie Hammerton threw back his head and laughed.

"I 'm not crazy about those grand-stand plays as a rule," he said. "Because in the first place they 're yellow, and in the second place they 're a darned lot of bother. But I just *had* to see you — I guess you know why — and I could n't think of anything else that struck me as really sure. How 'd I do it? Fair imitashe, hey? And I only told one lie, which is pretty good for a proposition of this sort. I *can* swim, Mr. Varney. Like a blooming duck."

Varney laughed. "You 're half an hour too late in telling me that, you know! But tell me how you managed all this: it was so clever! And do try one of these cigars."

They sat at ease on the awninged after-deck, a wicker table between them convivial with decanters and their recognized appurtenances, like two old friends met for a happy reunion. The *Gazette's* star reporter was as different from one's conception of a dangerous

adversary as it is possible for a man to be. He seemed only a pleasant-faced, friendly boy of twenty-three or four, with an honest eye and a singularly infectious laugh.

"Don't mind if I do — thanks!" said Hammerton, to the proffer of cigars. "Well, it was n't so very hard. After you steamed off, and left me gazing nervously out to sea like a deserted fisher's wife, I —"

"No, you don't!" laughed Varney. "Begin way back at the beginning. I 'm as ignorant as a baby about all this, you know."

Hammerton rather liked the idea of lolling on a luxurious yacht and explaining to the outwitted owner just how he had done it.

"Well," he said, "it 's like this. When you fellows jumped in and kidnapped Ryan and banged the administration in the eye and slapped the *Gazette* some stinging ones on the wrist, of course, we could n't just sit still and go quietly on with our knitting. Nay, nay! So we played up that gossip about you as strong as we could, sort of guessing that it might hurt your feelings a little. I 'm going to be frank with you, you see! And then another idea came to us that was n't half bad. You said you were Mr. Laurence Varney of New York. Well, whether that was true or not — begging your pardon, of course! — that gave it a New York interest, don't you see? So Mr. Smith, more by way of a feeler than anything else, wired it off to the *Daily* —"

"Why," interrupted Varney, "I thought you were the correspondent of the *Daily?*"

"So I am. But this time it was only nominal. He 's pretty fond of doing it himself, Smith is. Well, as soon as I got down this morning, he called me in and showed me the *Daily*. You 've seen it, I suppose? Of course, we were struck with the way our story had caught on, and particularly with the postscript about Elbert Carstairs and the mystery idea. Smith said: 'There appears to be more in this than meets the eye, Charles. Hustle you down to the *Cypriani*, or ever the birds be flown.' So I hustled. But then I did a fool thing that nearly gummed the game entirely. Just at the edge of the woods, I met a boy coming up the hill.

"Maybe you remember that kid, Mr. Varney — the telegraph boy? He was just on his way back from the yacht when I ran into him."

"Come to think of it, I believe I did see that boy hanging around here."

"As hard a little nut," said Hammerton, "as you ever saw in your life. When he saw me, he stopped short and asked where I was going. I told him to the yacht. ''T ain't no use,' he said — I won't try to give his lingo — 'they 've gone.' And the little devil actually went on to tell me how he had overheard the two gentlemen talking — guys he called you — and how you had decided to return to New York at once, and how he had looked back from the shore and seen the yacht already steaming away."

Thus Varney learned that he had one friend in Hunston who was true to him, according to his poor little lights; and he felt that that kindly lie of Tommy

Orrick's, if it was ever set down against him anywhere, must be the kind that is blotted out again in tears.

"Why, I 've been good to that kid," said Hammerton, "giving him cigar-ends nearly every time I see him and that sort of thing. I never thought he had so much pure *malice* in him. Well, like a fool, I turned right around and went back. I felt so pleased about it — for of course that was just what the *Gazette* wanted — that I dropped in at the Ottoman for an eye-opener, and by Jove! it was nearly an hour before I got back to the office."

He laughed, at first ruefully, then merrily — for had not everything turned out in the most satisfactory way in the world?

"Smith 's a beaut," he said, shaking his head reminiscently. "I don't believe anything ever got away from him since he was big enough to sit in front of a desk. When I told him that you fellows had gone back to New York, he never batted an eye. He just pulled a telescope out of the bottom drawer of his desk and went up to the roof. In two minutes he was down again. 'Charles,' he said in that quiet biting way of his, 'God may have put bigger fools than you into this world, but in his great mercy he has not sent them to retard the work of the *Gazette*. The yacht lies precisely where she has lain for these two days. Will it be quite convenient for you to drop down there and have a talk, or do you design to wait until the gentlemen call at your desk and beg the privilege of telling you all?'"

He laughed again, this time without a trace of re-

sentment; and so merry and spontaneous was this laugh that Varney could not help joining in.

"I suppose old Smith can tell you to go-to-hell more politely, yet more thoroughly, than any man that ever lived. I *ran* — and I was just in time at that, hey? Well, when you fellows steamed off, I kind of suspected that you were n't going very far. So I got a boy and had him trail you down the old River road on a wheel. By the time he got back and told me that I had sized it up about right, I had my plans arranged and my make-up all ready. That make-up was rather neat, I thought, what? Meantime, a long wire had come in from the *Daily* office, which made me keener than ever to see you. So I hired another wheel, ran on down, borrowed a canoe from a man I know here, and I guess you know the rest."

"I should say I did," said Varney. "Ha, ha! I should rather say I did."

One reason why it was so advantageous to make the boy talk was that it gave one a chance to think. All the time that he had listened so pleasantly to this garrulous chatter, Varney had been swiftly planning. Now he had the situation pretty well analyzed and saw all the ways that there were.

He might send the reporter away convinced that there was nothing in this new theory, after all, that the *Gazette's* trump card in fighting Maginnis and Reform was still his own unhappy resemblance to the outlawed author. Or he might send him off with enough of a new theory to make him think it unnecessary to go to Mrs. Carstairs or her daughter — the

fatal possibility. Or, if both of these proved impracticable as they almost certainly would, there was only one course left: he would not let Hammerton go away at all.

"But have another little drop or two, won't you? Those dips with your clothes on are n't a bit good for the health."

"Well, just a little tickler," said Charlie Hammerton. But he permitted himself to be helped quite liberally, with no protesting "when." "My regards, Mr. Varney! Also my compliments and thanks for accepting the situation like such a genuine game one."

Varney nodded. "The fortunes of war, Mr. Hammerton. But do go on. You have no idea how interesting the newspaper game is to an outsider, particularly — ha, ha! — when it walks right across his own quiet career. As I understand it, you 're on the regular staff of the *Gazette,* and then are a special correspondent of the *Daily,* besides?"

Hammerton, cocksure of his game and pleasantly cheered by the potent draught, thought that he had never interviewed so agreeable a man.

"That 's it exactly. Then, besides, we run a little news-bureau at the *Gazette,* you know — sell special stuff, whenever there 's anything doing, to papers all over the country. The bureau did n't touch this story last night — why, I thought it was too 'it-is-understood' and 'rumor-has-it' and all that, to go even with the *Daily* — in your old own town. It 'll be different to-night, all right. We 'll query our whole string on it now — unless," he added with frank de-

spondency, "the darned old Associated Press decides to pinch it."

"Query them, Mr. Hammerton?"

"Yes, wire them a brief, kind of piquant outline of the story, you know, and ask them if they don't want it. And I sort of guess they'll all want it, all right!"

"We'll see about that in a minute," laughed Varney. "There's lots of time. Tell me about that brilliant young editor of yours, Mr. Smith. The men in the office all like him and sympathize with his policies, I suppose?"

Hammerton laughed, doubtfully. "Well, they all look up to him and respect him as one of the cleverest newspaper men in the country. Personally, I like old Smith fine, though nobody ever gets close to him a bit. He's mighty good to me — lets me write little editorials two or three times a week, and says I'm not so awful at it. As for sympathizing with his policies — well, you know I'm not sure Smith sympathizes with 'em much himself. I have a kind of private hunch that he's gotten sore on his job and would sell out if somebody — well, suppose we say our friend Ryan — would offer him his price. No, I'm not so keen for these indirect methods, Mr. Varney. At the same time, it's part of the game, I suppose, and I always believe in playing a game right out to the end, for everything there is in it."

At the unmistakable significance in his tone, Varney looked up and found the reporter's eyes fixed upon him in an odd gaze which made him look all at once

ten years older and infinitely difficult to baffle: a gaze which made it plain, in fact, that the wearer of it was not to be put off with anything short of the whole truth. The next second that look broke into an easy laugh, and Hammerton was a chattering boy again.

But Varney's mood rose instantly to meet the antagonism of the reporter's look, and hung there. He pulled a silver case from his pocket, selected a cigarette with care and lit it with deliberation. He had learned everything that he wanted to know; the conversation was beginning to grow tiresome; and he found the boy's careless self-confidence increasingly exasperating.

"But as for undercutting Hare," laughed Hammerton, "I don't like it a —"

"Tell me this," Varney interrupted coolly. "When the *Gazette* prepared its story about me last night, did it believe for one moment that I was this man Stanhope?"

"Why, I 'm not the *Gazette,* of course," said Hammerton, a little taken aback by the cool change of both topic and manner, "but my private suspicion is that it entertained a few doubts on the subject. What do we think now? Look here, Mr. Varney," the boy said amiably, "you 've been white about this business, and I do really want to show that I appreciate it."

He fumbled in the side-pocket of his wet coat, which hung on a near-by chair, produced a damp paper of the familiar yellow, smoothed it out and handed it across the table.

"I guess I won't keep any secrets from you, Mr. Varney."

Varney, taking the telegram with a nod, read the following:

Gazette, HUNSTON:

Varney-Stanhope story good stuff, but lacking details, vague and inaccurate. Stanhope located in Adirondacks, though not reached. See *Daily* to-day. Man on yacht Varney. Apparent secrecy surrounding departure from here. Interview him sure and secure full statement as to business which brought him to Hunston. Also interview Mrs. Elbert Carstairs in Hunston. She separated from husband years ago. His yacht there with name erased suggests mystery. Rush fullest details day-rate if necessary. Pictures made. Expect complete story and interviews early to-night sure.

S. P. STOKES.

"Now," said Charlie Hammerton, when Varney looked up, "you see why I went to such a lot of trouble to get hold of you."

"Yes," said Varney, slowly, his eye upon him, "I see."

He folded the telegram, laid it at Hammerton's elbow, got up and stood with his hands on the back of his chair, looking down. At the thought that he had ever hoped to call the reporter off, to stop this deadly machinery of journalism, once it had been started, he could have laughed. The *Daily* telegram showed how impossible that had always been. Now it was suddenly and overwhelmingly plain that to force

a fight on Hammerton, which had been his favorite purpose from the beginning, even to seize and lock him up, would be of no avail whatever. Other reporters in endless procession, waited behind him, ready to step into his place; and the pitiless machinery, in which he, Varney, happened to be caught at the moment, would go steadily grinding on till it had crushed out the heart of the hidden truth.

He saw no way out at all. His mind revolved at fever heat, while he said calmly: "Go back to your employers, Mr. Hammerton, and report that you have no story to sell them. Say further that since they knowingly printed a lying slander about me this morning, you, as an honorable man, insist upon their making full retractions and apologies to-morrow."

Hammerton, who had taken his interview as a foregone conclusion, looked momentarily astounded; but on top of that his manner changed again, to meet Varney's changed one, in the wink of an eye.

"You can't mean," he said briskly, ignoring Varney's last remark entirely, "that you decline to make a statement for our readers?"

"Why should I encourage your readers to stick their infernal noses into my business?"

"For your own sake, Mr. Varney — because everybody has started asking questions. To refuse to answer them, from your point of view, is the worst thing you could do. As you know, newspapers always have other sources of information, and also ways of making intelligent guesses. While these guesses are usually surprisingly accurate, it sometimes happens that we

work out a theory that is a whole lot worse than the truth."

"Of course," said Varney, with sudden absentness. "That 's the way you sell your dirty papers, is n't it?"

"Mr. Varney, why did you come —?" began Hammerton, but stopped short, perceiving that the other no longer listened, and quite content to leave him to a little reflection.

For Varney, struck by a thought so new that it was overwhelming, had unexpectedly turned away. He leaned upon the rail and looked out over the blue, sunny water. A brilliant plan had flashed into his mind — a big daring plan which, far more than anything else he had thought of, might be effective and final. Instead of making an enemy of Hammerton, which could accomplish nothing, it would turn him into a champion, which meant victory.

It was a desperate solution, but it was a solution.

After all, what else remained? To dismiss the boy with nothing would be to send him straight to the Carstairs house with no one knew what results. To manhandle him would be simply to start another sleuth on the trail. But this plan, if it worked, would avoid that, and every other, risk of trouble. And if it failed, he would be no worse off than he was now; for in that case he would not allow Hammerton to go back to the *Gazette* at all that day.

He dropped his cigarette over the side, turned and found the eye of the press firmly fastened upon him.

"Mr. Varney," said Hammerton, with swift acute-

ness, "maybe I'm not as bad a fellow as you think. Why can't you trust me with this story — of what brought you to Hunston, and what made you run away this morning and hide? If it's really something that newspapers have n't got anything to do with, I'll go straight back to the office and make them leave you alone. Oh, I have enough influence to do it, all right! And if it's something different and — well, a little unusual, I'll promise to put you in the best light possible. Why don't you trust me with it?"

"Well," said Varney with a stormy smile, "suppose I do, then!"

"Good!" cried Hammerton cordially, observing him, however, with some intentness. "Honestly, it's the very best thing you could do."

Varney rested upon the back of his chair again and stood staring down at the reporter for some time in silence.

"Mr. Hammerton," he began presently, "I know that the great majority of newspaper men are fair and honorable and absolutely trustworthy. I know that it is a part of their capital to be able to keep a secret as well as to print one. For this reason, I have upon reflection decided to confide — certain facts to you, feeling sure that they will never go any further —"

"Of course, Mr. Varney," the reporter interrupted, "you understand that I can't make any promises in advance."

"Let the risk be mine," said Varney. "I am certain that when you have heard what I have to tell you, you will report to your papers that my 'mysterious

errand' turns out to be simply a matter of personal and private business, with which the public has no concern, and whose publication at this time would hopelessly ruin it. Mr. Hammerton, I came to Hunston to see Miss Mary Carstairs."

A gleam came into Hammerton's eye. Varney, watching that observant feature, knew that no detail of his story, or of his manner in telling it, would escape a most critical scrutiny.

"The fewer particulars the better," he said grimly. "I shall tell the substance because that seems now, after all, the best way to protect the interests of those concerned. Mr. Hammerton, as the *Daily* told you, Mr. Carstairs and his wife have separated, though they are still on friendly terms with each other. Their only child remains with the mother. Mr. Carstairs is getting old. He is naturally an affectionate man, and he is very lonely. In short, he has become most anxious to have his daughter spend part of her time with him. Mrs. Carstairs entirely approves of this. The daughter, however, absolutely refuses to leave her mother, feeling, it appears, that nothing is due her father from her. Arguments are useless. Well, what is to be done? Mr. Carstairs, because his great need of his daughter grows upon him, conceives an unusual plan. He will send an ambassador to Hunston — unaccredited, of course, a man, young, not married, who — don't think me a coxcomb — but who might be able to arouse the daughter's interest. This ambassador is to go on Mr. Carstairs's own yacht, the name, of course, being erased, so that the daughter may not recognize

it. He is to meet the young lady, cultivate her, make friends with her — all without letting her dream that he comes from her father, for that would ruin everything. And, then — "

He broke off, paused, considered. In Hammerton's eye he saw a light which meant sympathy, kindly consideration, human interest. He knew that the battle was half won. He had only to say: "And then talk to her about her poor old father, who loves her, and who is growing old in a big house all by himself; and tell her how he needs her so sorely that old grudges ought to be forgotten; and ask her, in the name of common kindness, to come down and pay him a visit before it is too late." He had only to say that, and he knew, for he read it in Hammerton's whole softened expression, that the boy would go away with his lips locked.

But he could n't say that, the reason being that it was not true.

"And then," he said, with a truthfulness so bold that he was sure the reporter would not follow it, "and then — don't you see? he is to try to *make* her go down to New York and pay a visit to that lonely old father who needs her so badly. Since she is so obstinate about it, he must find some way to *make* her go before it is too late. *Now* do you understand, Mr. Hammerton? *Now* do you perceive why the thought of having all this pitiful story scareheaded in a penny paper is insufferable to me?"

He towered above Hammerton, crisp words falling like leaden bullets, stern, insistent, determined to be

believed. But he saw a look dawn on the younger man's face which made him instantly fear that he had told too much.

And then suddenly Hammerton sprang to his feet, keen eyes shot with light, ruddy cheek paled a little with excitement, fronting Varney in startled triumph over the drinks they had shared.

"Make her!" he blurted in a high shrill voice. "Mr. Varney, *you came up here to kidnap her!*"

The two men stared at each other in a moment of horrified silence. Something in the reporter's air of victory, in the kind of thrilling joy with which he pounced upon the carefully guarded little secret and dragged it out into the light, made him all at once loathsome in Varney's eyes, a creature unspeakably repellent.

Suddenly he leaned across the little table and struck Hammerton lightly across the mouth with the back of his hand.

"You cad," he said whitely.

But Hammerton, never to be stopped by details now, ignored both the insult and the blow. He was on the rail like a cat, ready to swim for it, hot to take his great scoop to Mrs. Carstairs, to Coligny Smith, to readers of newspapers all over the land.

The table was between them, and it went over with a crash. Quick as he was, Varney was barely in time. His hand fell upon the reporter's coat when another fraction of a second would have been too late. Then he flung backward with a wrench, and Hammerton came toppling heavily to the deck.

Smarting with the pain of the fall, hot with anger at last, the reporter was up in an instant, spitting blood, and they clenched with the swiftness of lightning. Then they broke away, violently, and went at it in grim earnest.

It was the fight of a lifetime for each of them and they were splendidly matched. Hammerton was two inches the shorter, but he had twenty pounds of solid weight to offset that; and in close work, especially, his execution was polished. They had it up and down the deck, hammer and tongs, swinging, landing, rushing, sidestepping. At the first crash of broken glass on the deck, the crew had begun to appear, unobtrusively from all directions. Now cabin-hatch, galley-hatch, deck-house, every coign of vantage along the battlefield held its silent cluster of wondering figures. But McTosh, familiar old family retainer, slipped nearer at the first opportunity and whispered, in just that eager tone with which he pressed a side-dish upon one's notice:

"Can't I give you a little help, sir?"

"Keep away, steward," said Varney, between clenched teeth, "or you'll get hurt."

Saying which, he received a savage blow on the point of the chin and struck the deck with a thud.

"Oh, my Gawd, sir!" breathed McTosh.

But his young master was on his feet like a tiger, in a whirl of crazy passion. He had resolved all along that Hammerton would have to kill him before he should get away with that secret. Now it came to him like a divine revelation that the way to avoid this was to kill Hammerton. To that pleasant end, he goaded

his adversary with a light blow, sidestepped his rush, uppercutted and the reporter went down, almost head first, and cruelly hard.

He came up dazed, game but very wild, and Varney got another chance promptly, which was just as well. Hammerton went down again, head on once more, and this time he did not come up at all.

The crew, unable to repress themselves, let out a cheer, and came crowding on the deck. But Varney, standing over Hammerton's limp body, waved them back impatiently.

"Hold your noise!" he ordered. "And stand back! I 'm attending to this job!"

He picked Hammerton up in his arms, staggered with him to his own stateroom, and laid him down on the bunk. The boy did not stir, gave no visible sign of life. But when Varney put his hand over the other's heart, he found it beating away quite firmly. His breathing and pulse were regular — everything was quite as it should be. He would come round in half an hour, and be as good a man as ever. And he would have a long, idle time to rest, and look after his bruises and get back his strength again.

Varney took the key from the door, put it in outside, turned it and came on deck again. The crew had vanished to their several haunts. Two deck-hands in blouses and red caps had just completed the rehabilitation of the deck, and at sight of him discreetly vanished forward.

"Ferguson," called Varney, "a word with you, please."

The grizzled sailing-master came quickly, obviously curious for an explanation of these strange matters.

Rapidly Varney explained to him that the incarcerated man was a reporter who thought that he had got hold of a scandalous story about Mr. Carstairs, and was most anxious to get ashore so that he could publish this scandal all over the country.

"I am obliged to go to town immediately," he continued. "Rumors of this ugly story have already been started, and I must do everything I can to nail them. I am going to trust the responsibility here to you. As soon as I leave the yacht, I want you to start her down the river. That is to get the gentleman and the yacht out of the way. Go straight ahead for two or three hours and then come back. Make your calculations so that you 'll get back here at — say ten o'clock to-night — here, mind you, not the old anchorage. I 'll be ready to come aboard by that time. Have two men guard that stateroom constantly every minute. Give the gentleman every possible attention, but don't let him make any noise, and don't let him get out. No matter what he says or does, *don't let him get out.* Do you follow me?"

"I do, sir. To the menootest detail."

"If you carry the matter through, you may rely upon Mr. Carstairs's gratitude. If, on the other hand, you fail — "

"Oh, I 'll not fail, sir. Have no fear of that."

"I am speaking to you man to man, Ferguson, when I say, for God's sake don't."

He walked away to arrange himself a little for the

town, seeing clearly that there was but one possible way out of all this for him now. The sailing-master stared after him with a very curious expression upon his weather-beaten face.

At about the same moment, in a tiny room four miles away, an elderly, melancholy man sat bowed over a telegraph board and drowsily plied his keys. He was the *Gazette's* special operator, and, having his orders from Mr. Parker, who looked after the news bureau when Hammerton was away, he was methodically going through his list like this:

Tribune, PITTSBURG:

Ferris Stanhope or Laurence Varney? Baffling mystery surrounding prominent men, one of whom now hiding here. Probable scandal, one thousand words.

Press, CINCINNATI:

Ferris Stanhope or Laurence Varney? Baffling mystery —

II

CHAPTER XIII

VARNEY MEETS HIS ENEMY AND IS DISARMED

Varney crossed the square in the gathering dusk and went slowly up Main Street, looking about him as he walked. He had wrenched his ankle slightly in one of his falls upon the *Cypriani's* deck, and the four-mile walk over the ruts of the River road to the town had done it no good. Worse yet, it had made the trip down from the yacht laboriously slow, and he was harried with the fear that the irreparable damage might already have been done.

If it had not, if no reporter had yet gone to the Carstairs house, his one possible hope of escape stood before him like a palm-tree in a plain. Stiffened and strengthened by all his difficulties, his resolve to win throbbed and mounted within him; but he faced the knowledge that the odds now were heavily against him. On the long chance, he had played a desperate game, had come within an ace of winning, and had lost. His great secret which, beyond any other purpose, he had meant to guard to the end, was glaringly out. Now it was the iron heart of his will that it should go no further. Talkative young Hammerton had given him the hint how that might be accomplished; and if the method was extreme, it would be sure. Whatever the cost, it would be a small price to pay for keeping his

name, and Uncle Elbert's, out of ruinous headlines in to-morrow's papers.

Two blocks further on he came opposite a neat, three-story brick building, across the width of which was a black and gold signboard, lettered THE GAZETTE. Below it was the large plate-glass window of a counting-room, now dark. On the left was a lighted doorway, leading upstairs.

Varney crossed, climbed the stairs, found himself in a narrow upstairs hall, rapped upon a closed ground-glass door bearing the legend "Editorial." From within, a voice of unenthusiasm bade him enter, and he went in, closing the door behind him.

In a swivel-chair by an open roller-top desk, a young man sat, idly smoking a cigarette, his back to the door, his languorous feet hung out of the window. There were electric lights in the room, but they were not lit. All the illumination that there was came from a single dingy gas-fixture stuck in the wall near the desk, but that was enough.

Varney came closer. "Smith," said he.

"Well," said Smith.

"I have come to see you."

"Well — look away," said Smith.

There was not a trace of the "Hast thou found me?" in the editor's voice or his manner. If he expected assassination, he did not appear to mind. He sat on without turning, staring apathetically out of the window, just as he had done when he watched Varney cross and come in at his door.

"I have come," said Varney, "because I understand

that you are the sole owner, as well as the editor, of this paper. Am I right?"

Smith lit a fresh cigarette, flipped the old one out of the window and paused to watch the boys outside fight for it. Half-smoked stubs came frequently out of that window when Mr. Smith sat there and many boys in Hunston knew it.

"Assuming that you are?" queried he.

"Assuming that," said Varney, "I 'll say that I have come to buy this paper. And to discharge you from the editorship."

Smith drew in his feet, and swung slowly around. The two men measured each other in an interval of intelligent silence. On the whole, upon this close view, Varney found it harder to think of Smith as a contemptible cur who circulated lying slanders for profit than as the young man who wrote the famous editorials.

"And still they come," said Smith, enigmatically. "Three of them in one day — well, well!" And he added musingly: "So I have stung you as hard as that, have I?"

"Let us say rather," said Varney, whose present tack was diplomacy, "that I have some loose money which I want to stow away in a paying little enterprise."

"I am the last man in the world to boast of a kindness," continued Smith, in his faintly mocking manner, "but I gave you fair warning to leave town."

"Instead I stayed. And an exceedingly interesting town I have found it. Something doing every minute. But, as I just remarked, I have looked in to buy your paper."

"If I were like some I know," meditated Smith, "I'd be thinking: 'The Lord has delivered him into my hand, aye, delivered dear old Beany.' I'd embarrass you with questions, make you blush with catechisms. But I am a merciful man, and observe that I ask you nothing. You want to buy the *Gazette* for an investment. Let it stand at that. So you're the money-grubbing sort that supposes that everything on God's hassock has its price?"

"I believe it's street knowledge that the *Gazette* has its. But I called really not so much to discuss ethics, as to ascertain your figure."

Smith gave a sigh which was not without its trace of mockery. "Fortunately, I am hardened to insults. Editors are expected to stand anything. Times are dull — nothing much to do — drop around and kick the editor. You've no idea what we have to put up with from spring poets alone. Rejoice, B —, that is, Mr.— er — Blank, that the *Gazette* is never to be yours."

"You can't mean that you decline to sell?"

"When I implied to you just now that I was sole owner of the *Gazette,* I was, of course, speaking rather reminiscently than in the strict light of present facts."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I sold the *Gazette* at four o'clock this afternoon."

For an instant the room whirled and Varney saw nothing in it but the odd eyes of Coligny Smith steadily fixing him. By the shock of that blow, he realized that, after all, he had wholly counted upon succeeding

in this. From the moment when he had turned his state-room key on unconscious Charlie Hammerton, he had recognized it as his one chance. And now he was too late. Clever Ryan, who missed nothing, doubtless suspecting that the faithless editor who had sold out once to him might now be planning to do it again to a higher bidder, had outstripped him. And the *Gazette* to-morrow would damn him utterly.

But Varney's face, as these thoughts came to him, wore a faint, non-committal smile. "That is final, I suppose?"

"As death, so far as I am concerned. I leave Hunston permanently to-morrow morning."

"Who was the buyer?"

"There is really no reason why I should divulge his confidence that I know of; but, curses on me, I'll do it if you'll tell me this: Where is Charles Hammerton?"

Varney laid his hat and stick on the table, to rid his hands of them, and faced Mr. Smith, leaning lightly against it.

"I came here, Smith, to ask questions, not to answer them. On second thoughts, I withdraw my last one, for I can guess the answer. But before we proceed further, I want you to tell me this: what made you sell?"

The editor pitched another cigarette-end out of the window. Again a shout from the street indicated that it had become a bone of bitter contest among the town's smokers of the *sub-rosa* class.

"Suppose I were to tell you," said Smith slowly,

"that I anticipate a shakeup here which will cut the backbone out of my profits? What would you say to that?"

"I suppose I should say that it was ever the custom of rats to desert a sinking ship. So that was your mainspring, was it?"

"On the contrary," said Smith. "I am taking what is technically known as a small rise out of you. You ask why I sold. It was a man with the price. Money," began Mr. Smith, "screams. The cash on my desk was this man's way of doing business, and a good deal it was. However, it 'll net him six per cent year in and out, at that — a good rate in these lean times. I, of course, did better. I got — shall we say? — pickings. The past tense already, heigho! Well, it 's been a most instructive life. My father taught me to write. He was esteemed a good editor, and he was, but at eighteen I was correcting his leaders for him. Hand Greeley a soft pencil and a pass at the encyclopedia, so he used to say, and he could prove anything under the sun. I am like that, except that — well, I don't believe I need the encyclopedia. It was n't Greeley who made the remark, of course. It 's a rule on the press to pin all journalistic anecdotes on Greeley. You sign the pledge when you go in. To be accounted strictly moral," continued Smith, "an editor must be blind in one eye and astigmatic in the other. Then he rings the bull's-eye of Virtue ten times out of ten, and the clergy bleats with delight. You can't find spiritual candor anywhere with a telescope, except in the criminal classes. There are

no Pharisees there, God be praised! For my part, I see both sides of every question that was ever asked, and usually — don't you think? — both of them are right. I first adopt my point of view and subsequently prove it. Obviously, this is where the pickings come in. My grandfather started this paper on two hundred and fifty dollars, fifty dollars of which, I have heard, was his own. I could knock off for life as an idle member of the predatory classes, I suppose, but after all, I was made for an editor. In years past, I have, of course, had my offers from New York. Two of them were left open forever, and a little while ago, I telegraphed down and took the best. A grateful wire came in five minutes ahead of you. And that," he concluded wearily, in the flattest tones of a curiously flat voice, " is the life story of C. Smith, editor, up to the hour of going to press."

Varney, who had never once been tempted to interrupt this strange apologia, struggled with an impulse to feel desperately sorry for Mr. Smith, and almost overcame it.

" Smith," he said, in a moment, " why don't you tell me why you sold? "

The editor got up and stared out of the window. Presently he turned, an odd faint flush tingeing his ordinarily colorless cheek. His air of smooth cynicism was gone, for once; and Varney saw then, as he had somehow suspected before, that the editor of the *Gazette* wore polished bravado as a cloak and that underneath it he carried a rather troubled soul.

" You are right," said Smith, " I — was twigging

you again. Let us say," he added, looking at Varney with a kind of shamefaced defiance, "that a man gets tired of living on pickings after a while."

If he had been ten times a liar, ten times a slanderer and assassin of character, a man would have known that the young editor spoke the truth then. That knowledge disarmed Varney. To have sold the *Gazette* to one who would prostitute it still further was hardly a noble act; but for Smith it meant unmistakably that he wanted to cut loose from the old evil walks where he had done ill by his honor and battened exceedingly.

"All along," said Varney slowly, "I have had a kind of sneaking feeling that there was a spark left in you yet."

He picked up his hat and stick again, and faced the pale young editor.

"Smith, you have done me a devilish wrong. You have knowingly printed a vile slander about me, aware that the natural result of your falsehood was that some poor drunken fool would shoot me down from behind. When I walked in here five minutes ago, I had two purposes in mind. One was to buy your paper. The other was to throw you down the front stairs. I am leaving now without doing either. I abandoned the first because I had to; I abandon the second, voluntarily, because — I don't quite know why — but I think it is because it seems inappropriate to hit a man when he is down and something is just driving him to try to scramble up."

He put on his hat and started to go; but Smith

stopped him with a gesture. He let his eye, from which all sign of emotion had faded, run slowly over Varney's slender figure.

"I was n't such a slouch in my younger days," he said. "Football at my prep school, football and crew at my college. Boxed some at odd moments; was counted fair to middling. Some offhand practice since with people I 've roasted — agents, actors, and the like. As to that throwing downstairs proposition now, if you 'd care to try it on —"

Varney shook his head. "I don't know that I can explain it — and no one regrets it more than I — but all the wish to *smash* you, Smith, has gone away somewhere. The bottom has dropped out of it. Good-bye."

"You are going? So am I," said Smith, with a fair imitation of his usual lightness. "Going away for good. I hope you will come through this all right. I 'll never see you again. Shake hands, will you? You could n't know it, of course, but — it — is possible that I owe something to — you two fellows."

He stood motionless, half turned away, thin hands hanging loosely at his sides.

Varney, who had colored slightly, took a last look at him. "No," he said, suddenly much embarrassed, "I — I 'm afraid I could n't do it in the way you mean, and so there would n't be any point in it. But I — I do wish you luck with all my heart."

He shut the door, and started down the stairway; and he straightway forgot Smith in the returning tide of his own difficulties. He saw clearly that there was

no longer any hope; his plans were wrecked past mending. Persuading Miss Carstairs to keep her engagement to-morrow, his one great problem this morning, had become an unimportant detail now. Charlie Hammerton, with his merciless knowledge, filled the whole horizon like a menacing mirage.

It would not be enough to close the boy's mouth till after the luncheon and then let it open to babble. For Elbert Carstairs had flatly drawn the line at a yellow aftermath of sensation. He would count a tall-typed scandal the day after to-morrow, when his daughter was with him, fully as bad as the same affliction now. And, the newspaper finally lost to them, there was no conceivable way in which that scandal could be averted now.

But about the moment when his foot hit the bottom of the worn stairs, the door at the head of them burst open, and a curiously stirred voice, which he had some difficulty in recognizing as Smith's, called his name.

"Varney! oh, Varney! I — really meant to tell you — and then I forgot."

He turned and saw the editor's pale face hanging over the banisters.

"It was Maginnis I sold the *Gazette* to, you know — Peter Maginnis. I would n't have sold it to anybody else. You 'll find him at the hotel eating supper."

Varney, looking at him, knew then what it was that Smith thought he owed to him and Maginnis.

He went back up the stairs and the two men shook hands in rather an agitated silence.

CHAPTER XIV

CONFERENCE BETWEEN MR. HACKLEY, THE DOG MAN, AND MR. RYAN, THE BOSS

At half past six o'clock, or thereabouts, James Hackley dragged slowly up Main Street. He was garbed in his working suit of denim blue, trimmed with monkey wrench and chisel, and he wore, further, an air of exaggerated fatigue. A rounded protuberance upon his cheek indicated that the exhilaration of the quid was not wanting to his inner man, but the solace he drew from it appeared pitifully trifling. Now and then he would pause, rest his person against a lamp-post, or the front of some emporium, and shake his head despondently, like one most fearful of the consequences of certain matters.

Since four o'clock that afternoon, in fact, Mr. Hackley had been out upon a reluctant stint of lawn-mowing, reluctant because he hated all work with a Titanic hatred and sedulously cultivated the conviction that his was a delicate health. In view of the magnificent windfall in connection with the killing of his dog, it had not been his design to accept any more retainers for a long time to come. That occurrence had lifted him, as by the ears, from the proletariat into the capitalistic leisure class; and the map of the world had become but the portrait of his oyster.

But at noon as he lolled upon his rear veranda, chatting kindly with his wife as she hung the linen of quality upon her drying lines, a lady had knocked upon his door, beautiful and insistent, to wheedle his will from him. It was only a tiny bit of a lawn, she had reiterated imploringly, hardly a constitutional to cut, and there was not one tall fellow in all Hunston whom she would permit to touch it but Hackley. Dead to all flattery as he was, his backbone ran to water at the clinging beauty of her smile, and so incredibly betrayed him into yielding. And now, at hard upon half after six o'clock, post-meridian, the dangerous dews of night already beginning to fall, he leaned against a lamp-post, a physical wreck, with a long block and a half still separating him from the comforts of home.

At the next corner but one above rose the red brick Ottoman, its inviting side stretching for many yards down the street towards him. Windows cut it here and there along its length, and over their green silk half-curtains, poured forth a golden light which was hospitality made visible. Yet, so strange are the ways of life, the proprietor of all these luxuries, who stood at the furthest window, beyond Hackley's range, did not look happy in their possession. His eyes gleamed fiercely; his heavy chin protruded savagely, as though deliberately insulting Main Street and the northward universe. Even his small derby, which he seldom doffed save at the hour for taps, contrived to bespeak a certain ferocity.

The Ottoman bar was bare of customers, all Hun-

ston now verging towards its evening meal. Ryan rested his elbow upon its polished surface, and glared into the twilight. He was, as luck had it, in a terrible ill-humor. For he knew himself to-day for a man who had been physically flouted, a boss whose supremacy had been violently assailed, a king who felt his throne careen sickeningly beneath him.

Last night, when four men whom he had never seen before, three of them masked, had borne him off on a long wild drive, and dropped him at ten o'clock in a lonely bit of country eight miles from the Academy Theatre, there had at least been action to give point to his choler. All but out of his mind with passion, he had besought them all, singly or quadruply, to descend from their carriage and meet him in combat, thirsting sorely to kill or be killed. But they had only laughed at him, silently, and galloped away, leaving him screaming out futile curses on the empty night air.

Two hours later, when he had got back to Hunston, after an interminable nightmare of running over rough ground with unaccustomed limbs, and stumbling heavily to earth, and rising up to struggle again, he had learned to what uses his enemies had put that absence. Smith had related the story in the fastness of his office, and in wholly different guise from that which it wore next morning in the columns of his newspaper. And Ryan, listening, had slowly calmed, calmed to the still fury of implacable hate.

But he and Smith had quarreled violently. He was for publishing the story of his taking off in type as black as the dastardly act. Smith had a difficult time

in holding him down, however much he pointed out that Ryan had no shadow of proof against his new adversary on the yacht, and that public sympathy in an affair of this sort was always with the successful. In the end Smith had carried his point, because he was, of those two men, both the more wise and the more resolute. But this morning they had conferred again and quarreled even more bitterly.

Yet Ryan, plotting in the window of his splendid gin-palace, his eye always sweeping the evening street as though a-search, was not thinking of the young editor now. Two other policies for the days to come monopolized his attention. One of these was crushing victory at the polls. The other was revenge. Probably in thinking of these, he put them at the moment in reverse order.

"Damn him!" he suddenly exploded: and it was not little Hare that he cursed. "Damn his soul!"

In the next breath, the boss suddenly ducked, and disappeared from the half-curtained window altogether. A moment later, he appeared outside his swinging door, yawning and stretching himself, as one who, wearied with the tedium of life indoors, would see what beguilement might await him abroad.

The boss looked first up the street and permitted his beady eye to range casually over the view. Then his gaze came slowly down and rested in time upon the person of James Hackley, now almost directly opposite. The boss's countenance lit up with a smile of pleased surprise.

"Why, hello, Jim!" he called out. "Where you

been hidin' yourself lately? Ain't seen you for a week o' Sundays. Come across and pass the time of day!"

Mr. Hackley, who had been debating whether or not he should pause for inspiration at the Ottoman, and had just virtuously declared for the negative, shambled over.

Ryan eyed him sympathetically. "You look kind o' played out, Jim. What you been doin' with yourself? Come in and take a drop of somethin' to hearten you up some. On the house."

"Well," said Mr. Hackley, unable to resist the novel fascination of liquoring gratis, "just a weeny mite for to cut the dust out o' my windpipe."

Ryan went behind the bar and served them himself, selecting with care a bottle which he described as the primest stuff in the house. From this he poured Hackley a remarkably stiff potation, slightly wetting the bottom of his own glass the while. The bottle he left standing ready on the bar.

"Here 's how, friend Jim!"

Whatever Mr. Hackley's foibles, he was a man at his cups. His platform was the straight article uncontaminated by ice or flabby sparkling-water; and chasers and the like of those he left to schoolboys.

"Ain't took a drink for days," he said, holding up his glass to the electric light and squinting through it. "Cut it out religious, I have. Been settin' around the house, an' settin', under physic'an's orders, tryin' fer to get my health back so 's I could go to moldin' agin. But Lordamussy, what 's the use of torkin'! I ain't

no more fitten fer work than a noo-born baby. Well, here 's luck, Ryan!"

He set his glass down and involuntarily smacked his lips. The fiery liquid percolated through him down to his very toes. He felt better at once, more ambitious, less conscious of his constitution. And simultaneously, he lost something of that indolent good-nature which was the badge of all his sober hours.

Ryan regarded him with friendly anxiety. "You gotter be more careful with yourself, honest! Here — strengthen your holt a little. One little swallow ain't no help to a man as beat out as you are."

"As yer like, Dennis," said Mr. Hackley, listlessly. "What I reely need is a good long rest, like in a 'orspittle."

Kindly Mr. Ryan filled the small glass almost to the brim; and Hackley, though he had modestly stipulated for "on'y a drap" tossed it all off thirstily at a single practised toss.

"That 'll fix you up nice. But ain't I glad," said his host with a sly chuckle, "that nobody sees you taking these drinks on the quiet, which *we* know you need bad for your health."

Mr. Hackley set down his glass again, this time with something of a bang. "How 's that?" he demanded suspiciously.

Ryan laughed deprecatingly. While doing so, he manipulated the tall dark bottle again.

"Shuh!" said he. "It 's only the boys' fun, of course. Don't you mind *them,* Jim."

"What 're you drivin' at?" asked Hackley, brist-

ling a bit. "If you got anything worth sayin' to me, spit it out plain, I say."

"Well," laughed Ryan, "if some of the boys was to see you in here putting away a harmless drink or so, o' course they 'd say that you was gettin' up your Dutch courage. He, he!"

"Dutch courage!" cried Mr. Hackley, indignantly. "An' wot the hell fer?"

"Sh! Not so loud, Jim. Why, it 's only their little joke, o' course. They 'd say you was gettin' up your nerve to meet them two friends of yours from New York! Hey? He, he!"

"Wot friends?" asked Hackley again, hotly.

Ryan observed the mounting color on the other's cheek and brow, and his eye, which was like a small, glossy shoe-button, gleamed.

"Why, that 'un that killed that dog o' yours, and put you to sleep before the crowd, and that 'un that sent Mamie Orrick to Gawd knows where. But shucks! Drop it, Jim. I would n't have allooded to it, on'y I thought you 'd see the fun of the thing."

It takes a philosopher to perceive humor in taunts at his own personal courage, and Mr. Hackley, with three drinks of the Ottoman's choicest beneath his tattered waistcoat, was not that kind of man at all.

He leaned forward against the bar with a belligerence suggesting that he wished to push it over, pinning his pleasant-spoken host to the wall, and pounded the top of it till the glasses tingled.

"Fill her up with the same!" he ordered loudly, looking suddenly, and for the first time, very much like

the rough-looking customer who had tackled Peter Maginnis in defense of his dog. "An' I 'll have you know, *Mister* Ryan — I 'll have you know, my fine, big, bouncin' buck, that Jim Hackley ain't afeared of anythink that walks."

Ryan filled her up again, though this time more conservatively. He was a keen man and an excellent judge of what was enough.

"Shuh! Don't *I* know that, Jim! Why, after that big bloke licked the stuffin' out of you the other night, the boys said: 'Well, that 's the last o' that little differculty! Jim Hackley 'll never foller that up none,' they says. And what 'd I say?"

"Well, what'd you say?"

"I says, 'Hell!' I says. 'You boys don't *know* Jim Hackley!'"

"I 'll interdooce myself to 'em!" said Hackley savagely. "And whoever says that Maginnis licked me 's a liar. You hear me? Tripped my toe on a rock, I did, and banged all the sense outen my head —"

"I understand, Jim," interrupted Ryan suavely. "Just what I told the boys. O' course, just between you an me, I have been kinder took by surprise that you 've waited so long to get your evens. Why, this morning when the piece came out in the *Gazette*, tellin' the whole town that the feller's side-partner was that yellow cur-dog Stanhope, I says to the boys, first thing: 'Boys, we gotter watch Jim Hackley mighty careful to-day,' says I. 'I 'm afeard there 'll be gun-play before sunset.' 'Gun-play!' says they. 'F'om Hackley! Hell,' says they. 'You boys,' says

I, 'don't know old Jim like I do!' And then o' course, — he, he! — as the whole day slipped by and nothin' doin' at all — why, o' course, I won't deny that they ain't been jollyin' me some."

Hackley leaned far over the bar, and shook his fist in the boss's face. "I ain't a man," he shouted, "to be pushed an' a-nagged at in a deal like this. I takes my time, I makes my plans, I decides on the ways I 'll do it. Do yer pipe to that? An' now I 've got ever'think fixed and I 'm ready. Do yer see!"

The boss, who had retreated a step before that menacing fist, glanced out of the window and instantly started, this time with an amazement that was genuine.

"Why, blast my eyes," he cried, raising a pudgy arm, "if there ain't that dog Stanhope now!"

Hackley, following the pointing finger, peered over the green silk curtain out into the darkening street. A young man, tall and rather thin, in a blue suit and wide gray-felt hat, was walking slowly and with a slight limp up the cross street, evidently heading for the Palace Hotel.

The two men watched him intently, in a moment of perfect silence. Then the boss, who was not without a certain dramatic sense, said slowly:

"Mamie Orrick's old friend!"

A baleful light leaped into Hackley's eyes. He broke away from the bar with a movement that was like a wrench, and started for the door.

"I 'll fix him," he muttered dourly. "Fix him *good.*"

But Ryan, who wanted something much better than

that, sprang around the bar like lightning, and caught Hackley roughly by the shoulder, at the door.

"What, here in the square!" he hissed sharply. "With the po-lice in sight a'most! Why, you fool, it 'll mean the pen for you as sure as your name 's Jim Hackley!"

Hackley paused, his resolution unsettled by the other's superior knowledge of the law.

"No, no, Jim — it won't do," went on Ryan with bland decisiveness. "What you want is the two of them together, hey? — on a nice dark stretch o' road, and old Orrick and a few good fellows along to help. You ain't the only one that 's got it in for Stanhope, are you? An' you want Maginnis too, I guess? Come on in the orfice and talk about it over a seegar."

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH VARNEY DOES NOT PAY A VISIT, BUT RECEIVES ONE

Coligny Smith had told the truth. Peter Maginnis had bought the *Gazette,* and the *Cypriani's* troubles, from this source at any rate, were at an end.

Varney found the new proprietor at the hotel, completing a hurried supper, and Peter hailed him with astonishment and delight. All afternoon he had been bursting with his great news, eager to get word of it to Varney on the yacht. But there had been no trustworthy messenger to send; his own time had been filled to overflowing, with contracts, bills of sale and deeds; and, besides, his certain knowledge that everything was all right made it seem a minor matter that Varney should know it too.

"But what the deuce," he exclaimed at once, "brings you at this hour to the Palace Hotel and Restaurant?"

"I, too," quoted Varney, "have not been idle."

As they walked back to the *Gazette* building, where Peter had still various details to attend to, he gave a terse epitome of his afternoon's experiences. At the news that he, too, had sought to buy the paper which was so determinedly on their trail, Peter chuckled and started to speak; but when he learned in the next

sentence that Hammerton had their secret at his mercy, his face grew suddenly grave.

"The rub is," he summed up meditatively, "he may take his walking-papers rather than let go of such a scoop as that. Of course, he knows that the New York papers would trample each other to death trying to snatch it away from him. However, we can fix it somehow. We 've got to — that 's all."

"He 'll listen to reason, I dare say," said Varney briefly. "What put it into your head to try to buy the paper, Peter?"

They sat in the business manager's little office at the rear of the long counting-room downstairs, where Peter had thoughtfully paused and snapped on all the lights. At this question an annoyed look settled instantly on the new owner's open countenance.

"No brains of mine," he said shortly. "It 's a queer thing."

He paused to light his battered pipe, which he produced ready-filled from his pocket, and then said abruptly:

"Remember that old sneak named Higginson I mentioned to you yesterday? Well, I bagged the idea from him. When I hit town this afternoon the first thing I heard was that Higginson was going to buy the *Gazette* — had bought it, some said."

"*Higginson!*" Varney stared. "What the mischief did he want with the *Gazette?*"

"Echo answers. No good to us, you can bet," said Peter grimly. "Gave it out, I believe, that he was acting for a syndicate of New Yorkers who expected

flush times with the change of administration, and were rushing to get in on the ground floor. You can believe that if you want to. To me it sounds too fishy to do even a beginner credit. You could wake me up in the middle of the night and I could put over a better one than that. However," he continued, frowning, "to get back to my story. When I heard what Higginson was up to, it naturally flashed into my mind that it would be a mighty convenient thing if I owned the *Gazette* myself, instead of him. I raced off to Smith on the chance, shot an offer at him from the door and to my surprise he accepted it — right off the bat, cool as though the deal were for half a dozen copies of yesterday's issue — "

"You got in ahead of Higginson, then?"

"On the contrary," said Peter. "And that 's another queer thing — about Smith, I mean. Higginson had been in and made him an offer an hour ahead of me, and the fellow had turned him down flat. Yet I happen to know that the price I offered was under Higginson's by a pretty good year's income. Now what d' you think of that?"

Varney was silent a moment. "Smith wants a new deal all around, I imagine," he said slowly. "He knew that you would make the *Gazette* an honest paper; he did n't know anything of the sort about the other man. Probably he knew just the contrary. Bully for Smith, I say! But what do you make of this chap Higginson?"

"Search me," said Peter, rather impatiently. "He 's clearly imported by Ryan for some definite purpose,

but just what his game is beats me. There 'll be more developments, of course. After I 'd signed up with Smith I spent half an hour of valuable time looking for the rascal, but could n't find a footprint anywhere. He seems to have a special gift for appearing and disappearing. If he decides to stay with us, though, he 'll explain himself to me to-morrow, or I 'll know the reason why."

"Well, you 've already pulled his teeth, have n't you? This little purchase of yours knocks the wind out of his sails in any event."

"I wish I could be sure of that."

"And, by the way, that reminds me. Of course I 'm in on this, you understand — on what you paid for the *Gazette*."

"Not on my account," said Peter frankly. "When this town starts booming, as it will in eight days from date — Higginson had that part of it right, anyway — the *Gazette 's* going to be the prettiest little property you ever saw in your life. I saw it first and you will kindly back away off the grass. By the bye," he went on, "the lunch to-morrow. Hare and his sister both accepted — two o'clock. You ought to have seen Hare's face when I told him we owned this little old *Gazette*. Worth the price of admission alone — he 'd been hot as a stove all day about that story this morning. I asked Mrs. Marne whether Miss Carstairs had happened to say anything about coming, but she had n't seen her to-day at all. I guess there won't be any trouble in that quarter, though, when she gets through reading the paper's apologies to-morrow."

"I don't know," said Varney. "I am going to her house to-night to find out."

"Why?" said Peter, surprised. "What do you think we bought this paper for, anyway?"

"The great trouble is that she may not believe the paper. This is important, you see. The whole thing hinges on whether or not she is coming to lunch with us. The only way I can be certain that she is coming is to have her tell me so."

Peter jingled his keys. "Of course, we don't want to take chances, but —"

"Another thing," said Varney. "She promised to lunch with Stanhope — the celebrity — not me, you know."

"H'm," said Peter cogitatively, and added: "I guess you 're right. I 'm sure everything 's all serene, but it 'll do no harm to press a call. Well! I must fly upstairs for a while and see how things are going."

"What about the *Daily?*"

"That 's what I 've got to do right now — settle the *Daily* and dictate a strong *Gazette* story for to-morrow's issue, stripping the socks off the Stanhope lie and all that. I 've got to show the boys upstairs exactly how we want the whole thing handled."

"Fire away, old top."

"It 's all sketched out in my mind," continued Peter, rising. "Did it at the hotel over my chuck-steak. I won't be long. You wait here for me, will you? I 've chartered an automobile for a week and I 'll run you up to the Carstairs house and wait outside till you 're ready to go back to the yacht."

"Why these civilities, my son?"

"The fact is," said Peter, a little reluctantly, "that story this morning seems to have pulled open a lot of old sores, just as it was meant to. Hare 's picked up some loose odds and ends of talk about town to-day. I noticed two men hanging around here as we came in just now who did n't look right to me. I can't get it out of my head that there 's something in the wind to-night, and Higginson 's back of it. Anyway, there 's no use of running needless risks, now that we 've practically got a strangle-hold on the whole proposition."

Varney glanced at his watch. "Right for you. It 's too early to call yet, anyway. I 'll wait."

"Correct," said Peter at the door. "One last item of news. Stanhope himself, the real one, is coming to-morrow."

"Here — to stay?"

Peter nodded. "The caretaker of his cottage told Hare — told him not to tell a soul. But I don't believe he 'll stay long. The fellow 's clearly a fool as well as a dog."

"We ought to warn him how things stand here," said Varney, "no matter what kind of person he is. You and I know that we 've made matters a good deal worse for him."

"He 's made them a good deal worse for us, also. But I 'll see that he 's promptly advised to leave while the leaving 's good. Back in an hour at the farthest."

Peter tramped off down the passageway, banging the front door behind him; and Varney was left alone

in the little office to attend his return. At once it came to him that this was exactly what he had been doing ever since he had been in Hunston, — waiting for Peter.

"I am the greatest waiter that the human race has yet produced," he thought, despondently, and dropping down into a chair, stared long at the shut door.

What a day it had been! — beginning with cut-and-dried little plans that seemed sure, running off in the middle into black depths of hopeless complications, blossoming suddenly into unlooked-for triumph. Yes, complete triumph at last. The visit that he meant to pay a little later was merely an added precaution; he felt no doubts as to how matters would turn out now. To-morrow, the *Gazette*, Peter's paper, would set him square before all Hunston, and Mary Carstairs, sorry for the wrong she had done him, would come to the yacht as she had engaged to do. With the clairvoyance born of his swift revulsion of feeling, he knew that his victory was already won. Yet he did not feel now as a conqueror feels. In the loneliness of the tight-shut little office, he confronted the knowledge that he did not think of Uncle Elbert's daughter as his enemy, and that it mattered to him that she was to hate him and worse. . .

Suddenly in the entire stillness, he heard a sound close by, and straightened up sharply. Some one was gently trying the front door. He felt quite sure of it. He got up quickly and quietly, and hurried down the passageway to the front; but there was nothing to be seen.

Outside, the street, from the brilliantly-lighted room, looked inky black. He stood a moment listening intently. He thought he heard footsteps not far away, swiftly receding, but he could not be sure. Then he remembered the men that Peter had seen in the street a little while before, and understood.

Somebody was watching him, apparently waiting for a chance. Those whom Stanhope had wronged had been spurred to square the old account, and the *Gazette's* canard had not been undone yet. He yearned to dash after those retreating footsteps and find out who was the prudent proprietor of them. But even to stand here was hardly fair to Elbert Carstairs.

"How can I go sailing to-morrow," he said aloud, musingly, "if I 'm laid up in a hospital, or laid out in the morgue?"

He went back to his office, shut himself in again; and with the closing of the door he shut out all thought of the enemies of Ferris Stanhope. Soon his mind broke away from him, and went galloping off to the morrow. Great vividness marked the pictures that danced before the eye of his thought. Now the luncheon, the planned and fought for, was over. They were there, strung out gayly along deck, — Mrs. Marne, Hare, Peter, Mary Carstairs, and he. Then, by some deft stratagem, the others were gone and he was sitting alone by Mary at the rail. The *Cypriani* was slowly moving, as though for a ten-minute spin down the river. And then, as she gathered headway, he turned suddenly to Mary and told her everything:

how he had deceived and tricked her, and how she would not go back to Hunston that afternoon. . . .

It might have been ten minutes that he sat like this. It might have been half an hour. But after a time he heard, suddenly and distinctly, that noise at the door again.

There was the less doubt about it this time, in that the shutting of the door was now clearly audible, and there followed the distinct sound of some one moving in the main office. Then the door in the passageway swung open and footsteps pattered, coming nearer. The light firm steps drew nearer, halted; and there came a small rap upon his door

"Come in," he called loudly, encouragingly. "I 'm here, all right. Come in."

The door opened, a little slowly, as though not quite certain whether it was going to open or not, and Mary Carstairs stood upon the threshold, silhouetted in the sudden frame.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEREIN SEVERAL LARGE DIFFICULTIES ARE SMOOTHED AWAY

He had sat upright, his hands over his chair-arms, his mind and muscle tense; but at that unbelievable sight, he fell back in his chair relaxed, staring and dazed like one who sees a goddess in a vision.

"Good evening," said this goddess, looking decidedly embarrassed and remarkably pretty. "I — I am so glad that we've found you."

"You were looking for *me?*" he said incredulous, utterly mystified; and the instinct of long training, working on with no guidance from him, impelled him to rise with a stiff and somewhat belated bow.

"Yes. And there are two men with me who are anxious to help. . . ."

Her fragrant presence seemed to fill and transform the dingy office; and he was at once aware that her manner had lost that cool remoteness which at their last meeting had set him so far away.

He pulled himself sharply together, entirely missing the implication in her speech, and struck abruptly to the one point that mattered.

"Some one has convinced you since last night that I am not that man."

"Yes," she answered, looking away from him with

faintly heightened color. "I — I must ask you to forgive me for — last night."

He bowed stiffly from behind the table.

"But who — if I may know — persuaded you, where I appeared so — "

"My mother," she said, simply. "She caught a glimpse of you on the street yesterday. I did not know of it till to-day — never dreamed that she knew you. I 'm glad," she added hurriedly, resolutely contrite, "of the chance to — to say this — "

"It is extraordinarily kind," said Varney. He looked at her steadily, as far from understanding the mystery of her coming as ever.

"But I came," she went on at once, as though reading the question in his eyes, "for quite another reason. We happened to stop just now at poor Jim Hackley's."

The name riveted his attention. A quality in her voice had already told him that something troubled her.

"At Hackley's? "

She stood just behind Peter's deserted chair and rested her ungloved right hand upon it. He noticed, as though it were a matter which was going to be vital to him later on, that she wore no rings, and that there was a tiny white spot on the nail of her thumb.

"Some men are waiting on this dark street somewhere, Mr. Varney," she began hurriedly, "waiting, I 'm afraid, for you to come out — four or five — I don't know how many. You know — what that means. But oh, it is n't their fault! — they don't know any better, you see! — "

The sudden anxiety in her voice cleared his wits and braced him like a tonic: and so he came front to front with the fact that it was to help him — to help *him* — that Uncle Elbert's daughter had come to the *Gazette* office that night.

"I appreciate that perfectly, of course. But — the rest is not so clear. I don't quite understand — how did you happen to learn of this?"

"I? Oh, my learning about it was the purest chance. It was told me two minutes ago by a visitor here, a Mr. Higginson, whom I met last night. He is outside in the car now, and —"

"Mr. Higginson!" echoed Varney, astounded.

"You know him, perhaps?"

"I? Oh, no — no. But I interrupted you. Do go on and tell me —"

She began to speak rapidly and earnestly:

"This afternoon I went motoring, I and a friend of mine — Mr. John Richards. We took a wrong turn coming back, and of course were horribly late. But at the edge of the square we stopped a minute to inquire about Mrs. Hackley, who was taken quite ill yesterday afternoon. Just as I was getting back into the car, up ran this Mr. Higginson, very much flustered and excited. You see, he had just found out about all this — this plot — even to knowing where you were; he had seen poor Jim Hackley, it seems, not at all himself, and overheard him talking. Of course, we saw that you must be warned at once, so we took him in the car, and all three of us ran back here."

She paused a moment, and he prompted her with a close-clipped: "Yes?"

"I wanted him to — come in and tell you about it," she said hesitatingly — "but he would n't do it. He is a most agreeable old man, but, I imagine — of a very nervous temperament. So," she added with a hurried little laugh, "as I was the only one who — knew you, I said that I would come in and tell you myself."

"It was most kind — most kind of you all."

He turned away sharply to hide his sudden rush of indignation and resentment. Turbulently he longed to get his hands upon the sly Higginson, who had had the effrontery to dispatch a woman to protect him, and this woman of all others that lived in Hunston. . . . Protect him? Hardly. That an attack had been planned against his person was, indeed, likely enough, but not that any hireling of Ryan's should rush forward hysterically to pluck him from his peril. What move in that mysterious game, what strange plot within a plot was here? . . .

"Did Mr. Higginson happen to explain why he took such a generous, and I fear very troublesome, interest in my welfare?"

Genuinely anxious for light, he tried to iron all suggestion of a sneer out of his voice, but evidently he did not quite succeed.

"Oh, I don't think you ought to speak that way! Surely he has done only what anybody would do for any stranger who was in danger and did n't know it."

"And you?"

She looked at him rather shyly out of her somewhat spectacular eyes.

"That explains me, too — if you wish."

"Maginnis and I," said Varney immediately, "are not going out for some time yet. Oh, a long, long time! These poor fellows you speak of will tire of waiting long before that. And when we do go — "

"You must not go together."

"I don't think I understand you."

"Don't you see," she said, speaking very earnestly, "that that is exactly what they are hoping for? This ambuscade did n't just happen — it is manufactured — it is politics. Men like these have n't the initiative, or whatever you call it, to get up a thing of this sort. Some one has done it for them. Don't you know why? *They want to get rid of Mr. Maginnis.* But they can't hurt him *alone* — without having it brought right home to them — to the politicians. With you — it is — different — "

"Yes, yes — I see. But forgive my asking — did Mr. Higginson explain the situation to you in just this way?"

"Mr. Higginson?" she said, plainly surprised at his harking back to that. "It was not necessary. I understood the situation very well, from what Mr. Hare has told me. Mr. Higginson simply gave us the facts about these men hiding out there — there was no time for anything more."

He was staring at her with unconscious steadiness, and now his face took on a slow faint smile, which she was very far from understanding. Blurry as it all still was, light was beginning to break through upon him. Of course, that was all that Mr. Higgin-

son had told her. Of course. The last thing desired by that clever rogue, who used petticoats for stalking-horses and was not above hiding behind them for the safety of his own skin, was for the engineered "attack" to go off prematurely, landing only Varney and failing to "get" Maginnis. Warnings that the two should *not* go out together from Higginson? Hardly.

"I understand perfectly. Maginnis is quite safe without me, but not at all safe with me. You may count upon me absolutely. I 'll give him the slip and leave here alone."

"You must n't do anything of the kind," said Mary sharply.

She looked at him, unsmiling, eye to eye like a man; but she looked from under a fantastic and exceedingly becoming little hat, swathed all about with a wholly fascinating gray veil. Her skin was of an exquisite freshness, which threw into sharp relief the vivid coloring of her lips; the modeling of her cheek and throat was consummate, beyond improvement; and her eyes — he told himself that they could have no match anywhere.

Varney laughed shortly. "I am not to go out with Maginnis. I am not to go out without him. May I ask if I am expected to spend the night prudently curled up under the office-table here?"

The situation was odious to him; he knew that his manner betrayed it; but if she was aware of this she gave no sign. On the contrary her face all at once became miraculously sweet.

"You are n't thinking that there 's any question of

courage mixed up in this, Mr. Varney? Indeed, indeed, there is not. They would fight in the dark; they would fight from behind. The very *bravest* men would have no chance, and very brave men don't take foolish risks, do they? I know by Mr. Hare. Mr. Varney, I have a little plan."

"Indeed? Do tell me."

"Our car is at the door, you know — Mr. Richards's car. We 'd both like it very much if you would come with us."

"Where?"

"Well — I thought that perhaps you 'd come to my house. Only to get rid of these men and not to — get them into any trouble. Of course, no one in Hunston would annoy you when you were with me."

If he had hated the thought of accepting protection from Mary Carstairs less intensely, he might have laughed aloud. As Higginson's catspaw, she was certainly the most screaming failure that the whole world could have yielded. What, oh what, would the old gum-shoe have said if he could have heard that invitation?

"Thank you, but that is quite impossible."

"I am awfully sorry."

There was a faint stiffening in her manner. She began to draw on her right glove, slowly tucking out of sight the thumb with the tiny white spot on the nail.

"I hoped that perhaps you might come to dinner with us. I have n't had any yet. May I — suggest another way out of all this, then? There is a back

gate to this place, leading into a kind of alley, you know. I am sure that they — these poor men — have n't thought of that. Could n't you please go out — "

" Certainly," said Varney. " Certainly. Yes, indeed. I 'll do anything — anything in the wide world to avoid getting thumped on the head with Mr. Hackley's walking-stick."

Her face told him that she found his tone and manner somewhat disconcerting, but she took no notice of it otherwise.

" I hope it won't be necessary to do anything more than that. But if it should be, I hope you 'll do it. I 'm afraid I 've failed to make you see that this is really serious. Good-night."

But Varney, having a question to ask her, could not let her go yet.

" But — but," he said, hastily, " you must allow me to thank you — you and Mr. Higginson — "

" The thanks are all Mr. Higginson's. I 'm only a messenger — and besides, you are n't grateful at all, you know! You think we 've all been *extremely* intrusive! " She smiled brightly, bowed, and then was suddenly checked by a new thought. " Oh — I wonder if you would tell me something before I go? "

" By all means," said Varney, having no idea whether he would or not.

But the loud jangling whir of a telephone bell from the adjoining room cut into the air, drowning out conversation; and it rang on and on and on as though Central had had her orders.

"I suppose I'll have to answer that to shut them up," he said. "Excuse me for the merest second, won't you?"

He passed through into the brightly-lit business office beyond, and found the telephone, still ringing away on a desk at the farther end. Behind him the door swung shut, a circumstance for which he later had reason to be glad.

"Well?" he called impatiently.

"You, Larry?" asked a familiar voice.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Matter enough," said Peter in a guarded undertone. "Hammerton's loose."

"*What!*"

"It's a fact. God knows how he did it; but he's just phoned in here from a house a long way down the road. Wanted to let the city editor know he was flying in with the one best bet of the year. Luckily he gave no details."

Varney's lips tightened; he spoke in a low voice. "He must n't arrive — not till I've seen him first. Did you find out how he's coming — river or road?"

"Trust Uncle Dudley. He's borrowed a bicycle and is burning up the River road with it."

"Good. How soon will you be through?"

"About three minutes."

"You've hired a motor, you said? Get it and run back here as soon as you can, will you?"

He rapidly explained the situation, though making no mention of Higginson: how somebody had plotted to get them together in the darkness of Main Street,

how Miss Carstairs and her friend had kindly stopped to warn them, and how he had humored her by promising to take all sorts of precautions.

"Right-O," said Peter. "I 'll be in the alley at the back in no time. Come quick when I honk three times."

Varney came back into the little office where Mary Carstairs waited, fresh from more cheap plotting in which she was the innocent central figure; and faced her, uncomfortable, ill at ease, disquieted inwardly as a conspirator taken red-handed.

"It was Maginnis — upstairs," he explained awkwardly.

"Yes?" she said indifferently, and resumed the buttoning of her glove. "And will you tell me something now? It has been on my mind since last night."

"Certainly."

"Who was it that spoke of me to you and made you think that I was a little girl?"

He was entirely taken aback by the question; but he could have parried it easily, and he knew it. However, he was heartily sick of subterfuge for that night.

"It was your father," he said bluntly.

"My father!" She stood silent a moment, slim hands interlocked before her, heavily fringed eyes lowered. "So you know them both — my mother and my father. Then — the mistake — about my age," she added with something of an effort, "was natural enough. I have not seen my father for many years."

"I see him," said he, "constantly. Your father and I are great chums." A sudden insane hope over-

whelmed him, and he went on with a rush: "You know, or rather probably you don't know, that he and my mother were old friends; and I am proud to have fallen heir to the friendship. You say that you have not seen him for some time? He is growing older very fast this last year or two; he is much changed of late. And then, Miss Carstairs, he is desperately lonely, all by himself in that great house of his — "

"*Stop!*" cried Mary Carstairs, with quick passionateness. "Stop! You are trying to make me feel sorry for my father."

"Well," he said, as stormy as she, "*you ought to!* But your friends are waiting. I must not detain you any longer."

At the curtness of his speech a very faint wave of color ran up her cheek; and when he saw this he was sorry and glad in a single breath. At least, she could not say afterwards that he had ever tried to make himself falsely civil and lyingly agreeable.

"Yes, I have stayed very much too long already. You've promised that you will be careful, haven't you? I'm really too sorry," she said, from the door, "that your visit to Hunston should have been made disagreeable in all these ways."

"In the name of heaven," he said, stung into momentary recklessness, "you don't suppose that I came here expecting any *fun!*"

"Why — I had understood that it was purely a pleasure-trip that brought you here!"

He made no answer to this, but stepped forward and swung open the door for her.

"Maginnis," he said, "is to call for me immediately in a motor. We shall leave by the unobtrusive back alley. Two men, a motor, and a dark rear exit. You will scarcely imagine that there is any danger now. But may I thank you again for giving us warning when there *was*, perhaps, some danger?"

"So you think there is a 'perhaps'? If you take precautions, it is only to humor a —"

"I withdraw that 'perhaps,'" he broke out in a rush. "I blot it out, annihilate it. Who am I to catch at tatters of self-respect? Are you blind? Can't you see that every fiber of me is tingling with the knowledge that there was real danger, and that you saved me from it?"

The quick bitterness in his voice, which there was no missing, was the last straw, breaking through her reserve, demolishing her dainty aloofness. She shook the swinging gray veil back out of her eyes and looked up at him, openly and frankly bewildered, looking very young and immeasurably alluring.

"Will you tell me why you speak in that way? Will you tell me why it is the worst thing that has happened to you in Hunston to have been helped a little by me?"

They faced each other at the open door, not an arm's length between them; and the moment of his reckoning for the quarter of an hour he had spent with her that night was suddenly upon him. He met her eyes, which were darkly blue, stared down into them; and as he did so, the spell of her beauty treacherously closed round him, piping away his self-control, deaden-

ing him to the iron fact of who she was and who he was, shutting out all knowledge except that of her fragrant nearness.

"It is absurd," he answered her suddenly, "but to save my life I can't decide whether you are tall or short."

The front door came open with a bang; the noise brought him sharply to himself; and the next moment a pleasant impatient masculine voice called out:

"I say, Miss Carstairs! Er — everything all right?"

"Oh! — yes, Mr. Richards!" she called penitently. "I 'm coming this minute. No, please don't go out with me, Mr. Varney. Don't let anybody see that you are here."

"Certainly not," said he, struggling for a poise which he could not quite recapture. "Then will you be good enough to convey my gratitude to Mr. Higginson and say that I hope to have the opportunity of thanking him personally to-morrow?"

"Yes, of course. Good-night once more—and good luck!"

But he detained her long enough to put the plain business question which had been torturing his soul for the last twenty-four hours.

"We shall see you at luncheon to-morrow?"

He strove to give his remark the air of a mere commonplace of farewell; but at it, he saw her look break away from his and the warm color stream into her face.

"Why — I — I 'll come with pleasure. We don't

get the chance to lunch on yachts every day in Hunston. Oh, but please," she exclaimed, her embarrassment suddenly melting in a very natural and charming smile — "never let my mother *dream* that we've *not been introduced!*"

He bowed low so that she might not see the burlesque of polite pleasure on his face.

The back alley exit proved all that the most timorous could have desired. Peter approached it by an elusive detour; Varney appeared promptly at the sound of his three honks; and the rendezvous was effected in a black darkness which they seemed to have entirely to themselves. Not a hand was raised to them, not a threatening figure sprang up to dispute their going, not a fierce curse cursed them. The would-be assassins, if such there were, presumably still lurked in some Main Street cranny, patiently and stupidly waiting, entirely unaware that they had been neatly outwitted by the clever strategics of Miss Mary Carstairs.

The car rolled noiselessly out of the alley, skimmed off through the southern quarter of the town and bowled into the rough and rutty River road toward the yacht. Once there, since a sharp lookout for the reporter was necessary, they slowed down and down until the smooth little car, with all lights out, crawled along no faster than a vigorous man will walk.

"What're you going to do when we catch him?" asked Peter. "Want to haul him on back to the yacht?"

"No. I'm — only going to talk to him a little. Go on with the story."

"Well," resumed Peter, taking one hand from the driving-wheel to remove a genuine Connecticut Havana, "the first thing was a wire from the *Daily* firing Hammerton. That assisted a little, of course. Then, they asked us to give them a new, good man at once, and meantime to push along all the story we had. We answered with a wire that was a beauty, if I do mention it myself, telling them exactly how they 'd been sold a second-hand gold brick by a corrupt paper which was trying to play politics. It simply knocked the pins from under them. It took 'em quite a while to come back with inquiries about the name off the yacht, Varney's air of mystery and all that line of slush. My response was vigorous, yet gentlemanly, straining the truth for all she 'd stand, and even bu'sting her open here and there, I gravely fear. However, it was a clincher. It crimped them right. Not a peep have we had from 'em since."

"I suppose they 'll run four lines on the thirteenth page to-morrow explaining it was all a mistake."

"But that was n't the serious part of the thing — not by a mile-walk," continued Peter, the shine of victory in his honest eyes. "Am I still in the road? Sing out if you see me taking to the woods, will you? The more I think of what you and I have missed by a shave, the more I 'm likely to feel sick in the stomach. You know those rascals had already begun asking for orders all over the country — they were so sure they 'd have a hot story to send out. Not only that, but a lot of papers wired for it without being asked. It looked as if every newspaper office in America that

had got a glimpse at the *Daily* this morning instantly got dead stuck on that story. I stood at the telegraph desk and watched the accursed things come in, like this: '500 words story involving Stanhope, Rochester *Tribune*.' 'No. 3.—' That was the number of our story on the query list.—'No. 3.—Full details, Chicago *Ledger*.' 'No. 3—1000 words, Philadelphia *Journal*.' And so on and on. It looked uncanny, I tell you—all those far-away people calling for information about our affairs just like old friends. Will you kindly let your mind play about that a minute, Laurence? Will you kindly think of a situation like that with Ryan and Coligny Smith handling it as their little whimseys dictated?"

"I'd rather not. You wired those papers that the story was a canard and all that, I suppose?"

"No!" roared Peter, "I did something a whole lot better than that. I had one of the men write a hot political story about the *Gazette* and the change of management and the sudden rise of Reform. There's *news* in that, don't you see?—and it was the Stanhope-Varney story, too—the real one. When I left the office, they were selling it like hot cakes, all over the country—all over the world—"

"Hold on!" said Varney, sharply. "Here's Hammerton, I think—bringing in a whole lot better story than yours!"

The road here was straight as a string stretched tight. Far down it, they saw a single small light, dancing towards them a foot or two above the ground.

Peter threw off his clutch, clapped on his brakes and

stopped short. Varney slid out of the seat and stood waiting in the black inkiness beside the unlighted car. In the sudden stillness they could hear the rattle of the bicycle chain and even the crunch of the hard-blown tires, spinning rapidly over the road. Now the light was perhaps a hundred yards away.

"Blow!" whispered Varney.

The horn's honk cut the silent air hoarsely. Instantly the speed of the oncoming light was checked. It advanced steadily, but much more slowly, as though the rider sensed that his road might be blocked, but could not yet determine where the hidden obstacle might be.

"Hello!" called a lusty young voice suddenly. "Who 's there?"

There was no answer. The light came on more slowly still. Now it was fifty yards away, now twenty, now ten. Varney stepped out of the blackness, directly in front of it, and seized both handle-bars in fingers that gripped like a vise. The shock of the sudden stopping all but cost the rider his seat.

"May I detain you one moment, please, Mr. Hammerton?"

The little light of the bicycle lamp was all concentrated downward. Above that round yellow ray, faces were unrecognizable in the pitchy blackness. The voice, however, was unmistakable. Hammerton was off the back of his wheel in the wink of an eye, on a sudden desperate bolt for the woods.

Peter, still on the driver's seat, and seeing neither his friend nor his enemy, saw the light with the bicycle

behind it go over with a crash. That was when Varney's hands let go of the handle-bars. The next instant they fell upon Hammerton's withdrawing figure and brought it up with a sharp jerk.

Peter heard the ensuing struggle, but saw nothing. He paid Varney the tribute of sitting still in his seat and saying not a word. The contest was bitter, but brief. Hammerton fought wildly, but Varney's arms presently closed round him, squeezing the life out of him. Locked fast in each other's arms, they fell heavily, Hammerton underneath. Varney freed his legs with a swift wrench, swung round and came up riding upon the other's chest.

Charlie Hammerton was beaten and knew it. His body lay along the rocky road, inert and unresisting. He breathed in convulsive gasps, but apart from that, now that he was down, he never moved. He was as tired as a man well could be. Varney sitting closely upon him, holding him fast, felt that the reporter's clothes were wringing wet. However, he had him, and the *Cypriani's* great secret was once more in captivity.

The eyes of the two men strained into the dark where each other's faces must be, but they saw nothing.

"It 's all up with you, Hammerton," said Varney presently. "The *Daily* fired you an hour ago."

"Thanks to you," said Hammerton doggedly. "But if you think that lets *you* out, you 're a bigger fool than I thought."

"That is not all," said Varney slowly. "The *Gazette* has fired you, too."

The reporter swore bitterly beneath his breath: curiously enough, he did not seem to question the statement for a moment. "What of it?" he cried. "You don't think that 'll stop my mouth, do you — you *devil!*"

"There is still something more. Maginnis has bought the *Gazette*. He and I own the news of this town now. Coligny Smith is fired, too. The *Gazette* starts an honest life to-morrow, and the old dirty régime is over forever."

"Liar!" cried Hammerton, hoarsely. "Liar!" but there was no conviction in the mad resentment of his voice.

"No," said Varney, without anger. "I am telling you the truth and you know it."

"Well — there are other papers — other towns," cried Hammerton passionately. "What I 've got on you will sell anywhere. Why, damn you, *damn you, damn you* — don't you know you 'll have to kill me to hush this up?"

"No," said Varney, "I 'm going to do better than that. I 'm going to make a friend of you. I 'm going to make you editor of the *Gazette* in Smith's place with double your present salary and an interest in the paper."

There was black silence, more thrilling than any speech.

"Will you take it?" asked Varney.

Then the boy's overstrained self-command snapped like a bow-string and his breast shook with sudden hysteria. "Will I take it?" he cried with a gasping

laugh that was rather more like a sob. "Will I take the Court of St. James? Will I take money from home? Oh, my God, will I take it!"

"Hooray!" rang Peter's great voice out of the gloom. "Hip, hip, hooray for Editor Hammerton!"

Peter's tribute, in reality, was not so much for Hammerton's acceptance as for the astonishing neatness with which Varney had disposed of the editorship of *his* paper. But to Varney, rising limply from Hammerton's chest at the edge of the dark road, that cheer meant only that he had kicked the last obstacle out of his path and that he and Mary were going to New York to-morrow.

CHAPTER XVII

A LITTLE LUNCHEON PARTY ON THE YACHT "CYPRIANI"

The expectation appeared thoroughly conservative: not a cloud so large as a man's hand any longer darkened the horizon. At two o'clock next day Mr. Carstairs's *Cypriani* rode gayly at her old anchorage. At the rail stood Varney and Maginnis, hosts of pleasant and guileless mien, their eyes upon the trim gig which came dancing over the water toward them. In the gig sat J. Pinkney Hare and his sister, Mrs. Marne, blithely coming to lunch aboard with their two new friends.

The yacht's return to Hunston had been in all ways different from her going. She had slipped away like the hunted thing she was, running to cover with a hold full of fears, shying at every craft that passed, and yelled after from the shore by a stoutish young man with inimical opinions in his eye. She had steamed back, early this morning, not merely without fear, but proudly, her whistle screaming for the lime-light, her fore-truck flying, so to say, the burgee of vindication; and the stoutish and inimical young man had come aboard for breakfast with his new employer at nine o'clock sharp. Such was the measure of the

whitewashing work accomplished by three columns in Mr. Maginnis's *Gazette* that morning.

Of the "news value" of those astonishing columns, "the author's double" (as the *Gazette's* converted reporters felicitously dubbed him) had had abundant evidence in the many glances that followed him upon the streets of Hunston that morning. Varney's errand in town had had to do with Tommy Orrick. Some search was needed to find the transient tenant of Kerrigan's loft; but when he was finally located the matter of homes in New York was discussed and settled in the most satisfactory way in the world. It was decided that Tommy should remove his Penates to the city that very evening, where he was to be met at Forty-second Street by a Mr. Horace O'Hara, an interesting personage who had once been a burglar but was now in the fish and vegetable way at Fulton Market. Together they would make their way to the Home. Future plans had to do with an educative course at the graded schools and other matters so strange and exalted that one could not hear them mentioned without experiencing the most benumbing abashment.

The two good friends parted with a handshake, enforced by the young man — a unique ceremonial which filled the small breast of Thomas with a conflict of strange emotions; and Varney, having dispatched a telegram to Mr. O'Hara, and another to Mrs. Marie Duval, who had the home with no boys in it on 117th Street, had at once turned his face back to the yacht. He chose the woodland path for his walk, which struck straight down from the handsome residence

street and skirted the river at a point near the *Cypriani's* anchorage; and here an incident of interest befell him. As he sauntered down the path, conscious of a sudden curious loss of spirits, his attention was caught by the blurred sound of voices from the street, some fifty yards behind him; and presently the vague rumble crystallized into something like this:

". . . Infernal absence of livery . . . Far . . . station-master fellow say it was, Henry?"

The voice was masculine, carefully modulated, decidedly elegant. A different sort of voice gave answer:

"'E said, sir . . . mile, but knowing the hodd way they count distances away from the cities, sir, I'm 'ardly 'oping to see it under two mile — hif that."

Varney idly turned. The woods were thick just ahead of him, cutting off all view of the street; but further on, to the north, there was a break in the leafy wall, revealing a small slit of patent cement sidewalk. Soon, as he watched, two pedestrians stepped into view within this frame of foliage: a tall immaculate-looking man swinging a trim cane, and behind him a stocky, middle-sized, black-garbed fellow struggling along under two suit-cases and a roll of umbrellas. In three steps they had passed across the little open space and were again lost behind the trees, their voices running once more into an indistinguishable rumble.

Varney, halting in the path, had little doubt who the tall man was. It was Ferris Stanhope, returning to the home of his boyhood and sublimely unaware of the nature of the reception which awaited him.

Cordially as Varney loathed the great author, he had

no wish to see him taken by surprise and beaten to a pulp by mob-law. Moreover, if anything like that happened, he and Peter would be largely responsible, since the present excitement of feeling had been largely worked up for their benefit. He had half a mind to go straight after the *insouciant* visitor now, unpleasant as it would be to have to speak to him, and give him the fair warning he was entitled to. But he dismissed the impulse as plainly overdoing his duty: the man was in no possible danger in broad daylight, and Peter had already promised that he would attend to the warning business himself.

Now, as they stood calmly chatting at the rail under the brilliant sky, he told Peter of the author's arrival, and dutifully reminded him of that promise. Peter renewed it, without enthusiasm. His eyes rested on the approaching gig with a kind of fascination; and Varney followed his gaze.

"Isn't Hare dressy, though! Frock-coat and all that . . ."

"Yes . . . He'll add a needed touch of elegance to the somber setting of the drama."

"By the way," said Varney presently, "how did Hammerton get away last night? I believe Ferguson's been dodging me all day, but the fact is I've never given it a thought."

Peter laughed.

"He's sharp as a tack, that boy is. He played dead till old Ferguson got first interested, then nervous, and lastly careless. Lay there two hours without moving; breathed as little as he could do with, and at

long intervals fluttered one eyelid and took a peep how the land lay. After a while there came a time when the door was left wide open and only one deckhand in sight. Hammerton floored him with a chair from behind, and jumped over the rail. She happened to be moving close inshore at the time, and he was in the woods before the fatheads even got a boat down."

Varney echoed his laugh absently. All morning, since his return from Hunston, he had felt himself enfolded by a mysterious despondency, which he had seemed unable either to account for or to shake off. But now, as the final climax of his business drew near to summon him, he felt his spirits inexplicably rising again. A certain excitement possessed him; he was glad that at last his hour had come.

Hardly listening to Peter, he was running over in the most business-like way the little scheme, mapped out and rehearsed together that morning, by which the two superfluous guests, the mere "sleepers" in the orchestra, were to be detached at the proper moment. Yes, certainly; it was sound and would hold water. So would everything else. Peter's things had gone ashore two hours before, for he was to remain in Hunston. Everything had been provided for; the last detail systematically arranged. A surer scheme and a clearer coast could not possibly have been contrived or desired.

"At breakfast," continued Peter, "Hammerton suddenly blurted out that, while he was n't crazed with conscientiousness as a rule, one thing had kept him awake last night. Demanded whether we had the

nerve to think that we had simply bought him off with a job. 'Perish the thought, Charlie,' said I, looking kind of hurt at the bare suggestion. 'Thank you, Maginnis,' said he, dignified as the President. 'It 's an honest fact that I gave up the chase because I felt all along that you two fellows could n't possibly be mixed up in anything underhanded.' Aha! thinks me to myself . . . Eh, Laurence?"

"Just exactly."

"Well, cheer up. It 's done every day by our best families. And speaking of doing underhanded things," said Peter, "our guests approach rapidly. Up, guards, and at them!"

He took off his terrible Panama and waved it in a friendly manner.

"How-de-do, Mrs. Marne! Morning, candidate! Welcome aboard."

The sister and brother came up the stair, and were cordially greeted by their hosts.

"Ashore again!" ordered Varney over the side. "There is another guest."

"So we have not kept you waiting after all," cried Mrs. Marne, flashing a triumphant eye upon her brother. "Mary is not here yet — the prinker!"

She was dark, vivacious for a chaperon, easily on the correct side of thirty, and arrayed in very light mourning indeed. She had a will: for it was she who had baited J. Pinkney Hare with sociology and politics to abandon the law in New York, at which he was doing rather well, and follow her to Hunston. This was when her husband, a member of Hunston's oldest

family — for there was aristocracy in the town — had left her widowed the year of their marriage.

"Three times," Hare elucidated to Varney, "did she tell me, 'I 'll be ready in a minute.' And a ten-minute interval elapsed each time, by my grandfather's trusted chronometer."

"Oh, well," said Varney, "who 'd put any trust in a woman who was ready when she said she 'd be? Let 's get into the shade."

"Pinky," said Mrs. Marne, sister-wise, as she turned with Varney, "gets his ideas about women from the comic weeklies."

They sauntered aft, Peter and Hare in the rear.

"Committee meeting at five-thirty?"

"Precisely. And by the bye," began Hare. . . .

The candidate, in his tiny frock coat, with pale gray spats and scarf to match, looked overdressed in the brilliant sunshine. Yet probably Peter, whose purple tie blossomed too gorgeously above a blue silk "fancy vest" of a cut a good deal affected in the early nineties, looked the more striking of the two.

"He 's a fool," declared Peter presently. "The chances are that Ryan has a barrel of votes salted down where we 'll have the devil's own time tapping them. You can't smoke out a skunk in a minute, I tell you."

Mrs. Marne, in a cushioned chair, was being markedly agreeable to her host.

"It 's my *début* on a yacht," she was rattling away. "Is there any special etiquette? Coach me from time to time when you see me fumbling, won't you? And

if there *is* a code, there is one thing that I move shall go into it, here and now. Politics is — or are — *barred* for the day! Will you make it a rule that whoever mentions it — or them — forfeits butter, Mr. Varney?"

Varney laughed. "A rank outsider myself," said he, "I 'm absolutely willing. But I fear that in a division the nays would have it."

"You and I," she said, "against Mr. Maginnis and Pinky. A tie. Mary would have the deciding vote."

"Then you 'd lose out," said her brother, whose social manner, it was developing, differed somewhat from that of his official moments.

"I know women," said Mrs. Marne. "I could lobby Mary over in exactly two minutes, Mr. Varney. Besides, she is absent at roll-call, you know."

"The point is well taken," said Varney, to whom the thought was anything but a novelty.

"There she is now," said Peter over their shoulders.

Varney turned and looked ashore at the point where the gig was patiently waiting. There was no sign of anybody there.

"Upstream," added Peter, and the sudden honk of a motor-horn punctuated the observation like a full stop.

Two hundred yards above them, a narrow driveway circled down to the river to an ancient boat-house, and here the gaze of the little party turned. Where the road curved at the water's edge, there stood a great white touring-car, shining in the sun like a new pin. Upon the driver's seat sat a bare-headed young

man with a brown face and light sunburned hair, brushed back. On the farther side of him, gloved hand holding to the seat back, stood a young girl in a blue linen dress and a rather conspicuously large hat, also of blue. Both of them were looking off toward the *Cypriani*. Now the horn tooted again in salutation; and the girl, catching their eyes, waved her hand and smiled, making a little gesture indicative of her lack of equipment to navigate the intervening stretch of water.

Mrs. Marne answered the salute in kind. Reassuring gesticulations were duly wafted ashore.

"Who 's the new swain, Pinky?" demanded Mrs. Marne thoughtfully.

Pinky did not know. The sailing-master, at a word from Varney, hurled an order to the gig ashore. Then he swept his megaphone upstream, pointing it straight at the motor:

"The gig is on the way to you now, Miss."

"That 's an awfully sweet hat she 's wearing," said Mrs. Marne. "I wonder where she found that shape."

Miss Carstairs nodded her thanks to the sailing-master. The bare-headed young man sprang down, assisted her to descend, waited with her at the water's edge, assisted her most thoroughly into the *Cypriani's* gig. He was a handsome boy. He stood on the shore looking after the departing boat, laughing and calling out something.

"We wanted to have luncheon on deck," said Varney, abruptly, to Mrs. Marne, "as the day is so uncommonly fine. But about noon there came up a

little cloud no larger than a man's hand — it took a telescope to see it — and the steward, a pronounced conservative, begged us not to trifle with our luck. It seems too bad to go indoors on such a glorious day."

"But if we were to stay outdoors," she laughed, "would it have been such a glorious day? These are the questions that make cynics of us all. I am unhappy, Mr. Varney, because I have to fly the moment luncheon is over. The Married Women's Culture Club meets at four o'clock. Only fancy! — I am to read a paper on Immanuel Kant."

Peter, who had known no women in his life and was oppressed with the thought that Hare's sister was his personal responsibility for the day, was strolling moodily about the deck, hands thrust deep in his trousers pocket. Hare hung at the rail, his neat glasses turned upstream.

The gig came alongside and Miss Carstairs mounted the steps, the party gathered at the head of them to meet her. Peter, as it chanced, greeted her first. He had been introduced to her, in passing, the night of the meeting, but now he was dimly conscious that he had rather underestimated her appearance.

"I am dreadfully sorry to be late," she said. "We went for the shortest little drive, and all at once it was two o'clock and we were three miles away."

"You must have done something to the speed-limit, madam," said Peter in his stiffest manner, "for you are in ample time."

"How do you do, Mr. Hare?"

"Excellently well, thank you, Mary. It is supererogatory to ask you."

"Pinky," said Mrs. Marne, "have that word and I met? I don't seem to recognize it."

"Good-morning, Mr. Varney." Mary offered him her hand; but, greeting her, he had turned to pull a chair out of her way, and so missed seeing it.

"It is a great pleasure to welcome you aboard the yacht, Miss Carstairs."

"If I seem at all addicted to melancholia to-day," said Mary, "you won't be surprised, will you? My mother is n't well — really! When I left her an hour ago, you might have supposed that we were parting for a year. And then, besides I had an omen — a mysterious warning. . . ."

Varney's gaze became fixed. "A' warning?"

She laughed. "A rather queer and scary one! I 'll tell you presently."

"My dear," said Mrs. Marne, when Varney had turned to explain the working of the boat-falls to Hare, "*who* is he? He is simply c nning!"

Mary laughed. Hare, who was listening to boat matters with one ear only, thought it was rather a conscious laugh.

"Only John Richards. He came up in his car yesterday to spend a day with us. How do you like my hat?"

"It 's a love," said Mrs. Marne. "A great big love."

"I trimmed it myself. You recognize the feather, of course?"

They went down to luncheon. The ladies cried out with pleasure at the prettiness of the little saloon.

The room was darkened, through half-drawn shades, to a pleasant dimness. The table was round, red, and bare. It was a splendid mass of flowers. In the center was a great blossoming thing in a silver basket-frame, so large and high that when they were seated, Hare, who was neither, could just see Mary over the top of it. About it were four tall vases of cut roses, two of white, two of red. Button-holes in white and red lay at three covers, gigantic American Beauties, red, with flowing white ribbons, at two. And napery, silver, iridescent glass, all the materialities, were well worthy of so pretty a floral setting.

In short, it was a most alluring bait that Uncle Elbert's yacht had flung out for Uncle Elbert's daughter.

"These roses," said Mary, raising hers to her lips, "were never grown in Hunston."

"I want to explain a rule that Mr. Varney and I adopted just now, Mr. Maginnis," said Mrs. Marne. "Did you hear it? It concerns the two subjects of butter and politics."

Hare lifted a glass of the *Cypriani's* excellent sherry and caught his host's eye. "Mr. Varney! By a pleasant coincidence, we happen to be gathered here within a day or two of the birthday of one member of our charming party. The little discrepancy of date is immaterial — am I right? Why may I not propose the health and great happiness of Miss Carstairs?"

"Standing!" cried Mrs. Marne, pushing back her chair. "Bravo!"

They stood, glasses raised, turned toward Miss Car-

stairs, bowing, saluting her according to their several kinds; and she sat, looking up at them, laughing, flushed, prettily pleased by the little rite. For Varney, conscious of the mockery of his felicitations, there had been no escape. But Hare, who noticed everything, observed that he did not touch his glass to his lips.

The luncheon progressed merrily. It was evident from the beginning that it was to be a pronounced success. Only Peter was stiff and bored; and even he grew somewhat enlivened before the ceremonies ended. There was Scotch and soda for the gentlemen, and he did not spurn it when the decanters passed. Varney, whose want of appetite pained McTosh, was a conversational tower of strength. But his talk was false-faced talk, his mirth was lying mirth, his smile a painted smile. Uncle Elbert's daughter sat at his left, as befitted a guest of honor. Her eyes, when she looked at him, were kind and friendly, but it early became his habit not to meet them; for he always saw behind that — saw them changed as he was destined to see them within the hour. . . .

"So you're quite alive and well to-day!" she said to him presently. "Will you believe that I picked up the *Gazette* this morning with fear and trembling?"

"Oh — thank you — yes! We eluded Mr. Hackley's well-meant attentions with marvelous dexterity and success."

"Ah, you still don't take it seriously, I see. I'm going to make one more effort to frighten you to-day — but I'm afraid you are one of these terribly reckless people who think being safe is too tame to be inter-

esting. What do you think of our poor little city, Mr. Varney?"

"I? I assure you," he said, turning a gay face toward her, "I think it positively the most exciting town I ever saw in my life. But then, of course, I've had unusual privileges. What is much more important — what do you think of it?"

"Of course, I love it. My mother went here to boarding school a great, great many years ago. No, not that — some years ago. She fell in love with the place on account of the scenery, and the air, which she says is fresher than you can get in other places. Personally, I believe that the same quality can be had elsewhere, but she says not at all. So when we — left New York, nothing would do for her but to come straight here."

"But don't you find it a little dull?"

"Dull! Why," she cried, after a moment, "you talk exactly the way she does."

"May I offer you an olive?"

She took it daintily in her fingers, bit it and resumed: "I suppose your metropolitan idea is that a person would be buried alive in Hunston?"

A sunny shaft broke in from without and became entangled with her hair, which was in some ways so curiously like it. McTosh, whose eye was everywhere, promptly lowered a shade two inches — the one blunder he made that day.

"Is n't it?"

"That would depend altogether on the person."

"Me."

"I do think so, decidedly."

"Really you and my mother would be very congenial."

"McTosh, the bread," said Peter's cool voice.

Mrs. Marne, who had been interested by Peter's taciturnity and fascinated by his waistcoat, had been leading that ordinarily masterful man something of a conversational dance. Detached for the moment by his demand for provender, she called across the table: "Mary, I herewith invite you to attend the Culture Club meeting at four o'clock this afternoon, to lead the applause for my paper on Immanuel Kant. Pinky wrote it and — "

"Before any court in the land," said Hare, lifting his glance above squab *en casserole,* "I am prepared to establish my innocence of this charge."

"If he positively will not take no for an answer," continued Mrs. Marne, "you may bring John Richards along. No claret, thank you, Mr. Maginnis. Men, it is true, are not admitted to the sacred mysteries, but I will arrange to have him seated on the piazza where he may eavesdrop the whole thing through the long French window."

"Unfortunately," said Mary, "he has to go to Albany this afternoon, I believe."

"To resume our conversation, Mrs. Marne," said Peter.

"I should n't if I were you," Hare recommended. "If memory serves, it was hardly worth it. Why not, instead, permit me to tell the story of the seven fat men of Kilgore?"

McTosh, of the gum-shoe tread, shuffled courses dextrously. An under-steward assisted in the presentation of the viands, another manipulated dishes in the hidden precincts of the pantry. The service was swift and noiseless, but not more so than the passage of time. The hands of the little clock fastened against the forward bulkhead already stood at quarter after three.

Mary's eyes, which had been resting on the candidate, turned back to Varney, and they were shining. "Seriously, Mr. Varney," she said in a lowered voice — "how could any one possibly be buried in a town where Mr. Hare is?"

"Mr. Hare?"

She nodded. "Because he is so *alive!* Why just to live in the same town with him is an inspiration. To be friends with him — well, that is all you ever need to keep from feeling buried alive! He isn't listening, is he?"

"No," said Varney, "he is, I believe, telling the story of the seven fat men of Kilgore."

"If you wish to hand bouquets to Pinky for a while," called Mrs. Marne, aside, "I will see that you are not disturbed, Mary."

"Thank you, Elsie, but it's your sisterly duty to listen to the story. Mr. Hare," she presently went on, to Varney, "had a great career ahead of him in New York — Judge Prentiss told me so — and he kicked it over without a quiver and came up here where there isn't any glitter or fireworks, but only plain hard work. Politics is only an incident with him. No one will

ever understand all that he has done for Hunston, without any thought of return — working with all his heart and his head and his hands."

"Ha! Ha!" said Peter down the table. "That reminds me —"

"You have known him a long time, I suppose?" asked Varney.

"Yes," she laughed, "but he has known me longer — ever since I was a very little girl. That is why he calls me by my name, which gives him a great moral advantage. I call him Mister because I did n't know him when he was a very little boy. I have figured it all out, and I could n't have, because he was thirteen when I was born. Besides, you can't begin to know people till you have reached a certain age. Can you?"

"Not to say know, I should think."

"Say six," said Miss Carstairs. "That 's liberal, I think. Well, he was nineteen *then,* and I never even saw him till seven years afterwards, anyway. That made him twenty-six, which was much too late. Now he says that I should call him by his name, but of course I 'm not going to do it."

"It is hard to change an old habit in a thing like that."

"Oh, I don't mind the hardness of it. But whoever heard of calling a Mayor by his first name? Call a Mayor Pinky! The thought is ridiculous. Is n't it, Mr. Hare?"

But Hare was engrossed with a conversation of his own, now turned upon economic lines.

"Everything in the world that goes up must come down," he was saying didactically, "except prices. They alone defy the laws of gravity."

Peter challenged the aphorism, wordily. Mrs. Marne smiled at Mary across the flower-sweet table.

"No," answered Hare presently. "Money is n't everything, but it is most. It makes the mare go; also the nightmare. It talks, it shouts, and in the only language that needs no interpreter. I may describe it, without fear of contradiction, as the Esperanto of commerce."

"Clever, Pinky!" called his sister, derisively. "Confess that you rehearsed this before a mirror."

The luncheon ended. If anything had been wanting to prove how agreeable it had been, it appeared now in the pretty reluctance with which the ladies rose. There was the customary pushing back of chairs, smoothing down of garments, recovering of handkerchiefs from beneath the board. The room and the table were the objects of new compliments, given in farewell.

"Who would have dreamed," said Mary, looking back from the door at her father's perfectly appointed room, "that yachts were as nice as this?"

"And to think," said Mrs. Marne, "that it was all done by a Mere Man."

McTosh, the mere man in question, blushed violently behind his deft hand.

They stepped up on deck into the shade of a great striped awning, and loitered along the side, caught by the beauty of the late summer scene. Sky and water and green wood blended into practised perfectness.

The rippling water was blue as the heavens, which was very blue indeed. The sun kissed it like a lover.

"Will some one kindly tell me," demanded Hare, referring to his sister's remark, "how the superstition arose that men have no taste?"

"I have read," said Mary idly, her back against the rail, "that it was invented by the authority who started the slander about women's having no sense of humor."

"Why, they have n't, have they?"

"You 're wrong there, Hare," said Peter, out of his fathomless ignorance. "For my part I think that women are often more amusing than men."

"Of course, Maginnis, of course. The point is that it never dawns on them."

They were strung out along the after deck, a gay and friendly company, exactly as Varney had pictured them in his thoughts. From the hatch emerged the stewards, in stately processional, bearing coffee and cigars, their paraphernalia and appurtenances. Twenty feet away, on the other side, was to be seen the sailing-master's wife, sitting under orders, sedate, matronly, knitting a pale blue shawl and giving to the bright scene an air of indescribable domesticity.

"Women," said Mrs. Marne to Varney, "have a splendid sense of humor. I am a woman and I know. True, we keep a tight grip on our wit when we are with men, because, whatever men may say in moments like these, they do loathe and despise a comical woman. But when we are alone together — ah, dearie me, what funny things we do say! Don't we, Mary?"

Varney, to show himself how cool he was, was

lighting a cigarette, and had just perceived with annoyance that his hand shook.

"At least," he answered easily, "no man will ever disprove that, since no man has ever had the pleasure of being present when women are alone together. I can recommend the Invincibles, Hare."

Peter, as one sensitive to the duties of host, now begged Mrs. Marne to let him show her something of the yacht. He mentioned the crew's quarters and the —er — butler's pantry as points which he particularly desired to bring to her attention.

"I 'd *love* to see them! Oh — I must take just one peep before I fly."

The trio started forward in a whirl of her animated talk, Peter leading with a dutiful face, Hare strutting solemnly along in the rear. Mary glanced at Varney.

"Are n't you going to show me your butler's pantry, too?"

"Rather!" he said, starting with her up the deck. "But I want you to see the whole ship, you know, much more thoroughly than Mrs. Marne has time for — and to take a little spin —"

He was interrupted by an exaggerated cry from the lady last mentioned, who, happening to glance down at her watch, had stopped short at the cabin-hatch in great dismay.

Now she turned back to Varney crying: "Oh! oh! Mr. Varney, it 's *twenty minutes to four!* I must fly to my Culture *this instant!*"

At that, for Varney, the little party lost the last traces of its false good-fellowship and stood out for

what it was. Mrs. Marne's hurried departure slightly dislocated his carefully-laid plans; it was evident that her brother had no intention of going with her. Over her unconscious head, his eye caught Peter's in a faint sweep which indicated the little candidate.

"Oh — must you, Mrs. Marne?" said Varney, with civil regret.

"I *must!* I wish — oh, how I wish! — that culture had never been invented. The world lasted a long time without it, I'm sure. I detest to eat and run, yet what else can possibly be done by the author of *'Ideals of Immanuel Kant'?*"

"It is too bad," said Varney, "but if duty really calls, I suppose there is nothing for it but to have your boat ready at once."

"I ought to go, too," said Mary.

A chorus of protests annihilated the thought. Mrs. Marne declared that she would never, no, never, forgive herself if she broke up so delightful a party. It was unanimously decided that the other guests were to remain long enough to be shown something of the yacht. Mention of a little spin down the river was once more casually thrown out.

Events moved swiftly. The gig was manned, waiting. Varney under cover of issuing orders, found opportunity to say a hurried word to Peter. Mrs. Marne approached Mary, who was discussing yachts with Hare, to make adieu. Suddenly the large face of Maginnis loomed over her shoulder.

"Good-bye, Miss Carstairs — you'll excuse me, won't you?" said he, briefly. "I — I thought perhaps I'd just walk in with Mrs. Marne."

Mary repressed an inclination to smile. "Certainly, Mr. Maginnis. Good-bye. I've enjoyed it a great, great deal." And to Pinkney Hare she added: "You are going over the yacht with us, of course?"

Mrs. Marne embarked in a shower of farewells. Peter, however, loitered at the head of the stairs, and the gig waited at the foot of them. Varney stood at Miss Carstairs's elbow, cool, smiling, controlling the situation with entire and easy mastery.

"It occurs to me, Miss Carstairs," he said, "that I should begin our tour by showing you our sailing-master's wife, Mrs. Ferguson — decidedly the cultured member of the ship's household. She reads Shakespeare. She recites Browning. I dare say that she even sings a little Tennyson. You would enjoy meeting her, I am sure. Will you step around the other side for a moment?"

"How exceedingly interesting," murmured Hare, falling in beside them. "Years ago, I used to read quite a bit of poetry myself."

The gig still waited at the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Marne, waving upward last adieus to Mary and Varney, called: "Do hurry, Mr. Maginnis. I'm outrageously late."

But Peter, who had more important matters than Kant on his mind at that moment, answered in a low, hurried voice: "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Marne — but I *must* see your brother at once about — a critical matter. Oh, I say, Hare."

The candidate, now some distance up the deck with the others, stopped and looked back.

"May I have a word with you, please?"

Hare turned, with only a polite show of reluctance to his host and Miss Carstairs, and drew near. Politics interested him far more than the staunchest ship that ever sailed.

Five minutes later when Varney, having launched Miss Carstairs and the sailing-master's wife upon a strictly innocuous conversation, came around the deck-house again, neither the candidate nor his sister was anywhere to be seen. Peter — he who had engaged to accompany the lady — stood alone on the sunny deck, staring off at the returning gig, his great hands clenched in his coat-pockets. He met his friend with a calm face.

"It 's all over but the shouting," he said. "They 've just landed. I told Hare that there was a plot on against your life — which is very likely true by the way — said he and I must have a conference at once without alarming Miss Carstairs. I had to draw it pretty strong, you can bet, to make him go without telling her good-bye."

"You 've got the letters," said Varney hurriedly. "Go to see Mrs. Carstairs the first thing — make the explanations. Call up Uncle Elbert and tell him six-thirty for the carriage at the dock. Be sure to explain to Hare and Mrs. Marne at once — prearranged visit to her father, kept quiet for — any good reason."

"Of course," said Peter. "Well, I must hurry along. I promised to overtake them in the woods. Oh, the lies I 've told in this ten minutes!"

He turned and picked up his hat and cane to go.

To Varney, the simple act drove home with great force the stark fact that he was face to face with his business at last. Peter, holding out his hand to say good-bye, was struck to speculation by the look of that eye.

"Well, good luck, Larry!"

"In heaven's name — what does that mean?"

"Hanged if I know," said Peter, frankly. "I 'll see you in New York — if not sooner." With which cryptic observation he clattered down the stairs to the gig.

Varney beckoned the sailing-master from the quarter-deck.

"I am returning to New York, as I told you, Ferguson, with the young lady, Mr. Carstairs's daughter. Start as soon as possible."

The sailing-master stared at the deck. "Ready at once, sir."

Mrs. Ferguson's fondness for classical poetry was no part of any stage make-believe. Varney, having found her the day before sitting on a coil of rope with Mr. Pope's *Odyssey* from the ship's library, had conceived a veneration for her taste. Now, as he drew near them again, she was telling Mary that though Tennyson was fine for the purty language, it was really Browning who understood the human heart. And down in the engine room they had everything ready for the bell.

"Have you two settled the poets' hash yet?" asked Varney. "I hope you did n't make the mistake of preferring Tennyson to Browning, Miss Carstairs? Thank you very much for entertaining our guest so nicely, Mrs. Ferguson."

"What a wonder that woman is!" said Mary, looking back at her as they walked away. "I had thought that I was rather good at liking poetry, but she leaves me feeling like the dunce at the kindergarten."

She turned and looked out over the water, caught anew by the shining landscape. They stood side by side in the shade of the wide low awning. Half a mile to their left huddled the town, whither the others were already on their way; a few hundred yards behind them stood the big white Carstairs house, handsomely cresting the hill. From many miles to the northward a breeze danced down the river, and played capriciously over their faces, and so whisked on about its business. All the world looked smiling and very good.

Suddenly a bell tinkled. There was a slight splash, a faint rumble and quiver.

Varney laughed. "The passion for poetry," said he, "is a curious and complex thing. Its origin is shrouded in the earliest dawn of civilization. It appears in man's first instinctive gropings toward written self-expression —"

"Why," said Mary, in sudden surprise, "*we are going!*"

CHAPTER XVIII

CAPTIVATING MARY

So Elbert Carstairs's dream had come true, and his daughter was going home to him at his desire. She stood on his yacht, as truly a prisoner as though she wore a ball and chain; and the beat of the engines, already gathering speed, was driving her straight toward that dock in Harlem whither he, within a very short time, would be driving down to meet her.

"Going? Of course we are," said Varney.

He leaned against the rail and, looking at Mary, almost laughed at the thought of how easy and simple it was.

"The point of being on a yacht, Miss Carstairs, is to see her go. Otherwise, one might as well sit in the den at home and look at pictures of them in the encyclopedia."

"But I — did n't expect to go," she said, gazing at him doubtfully — "only to look around a little. I 'm really afraid I have n't time for a sail."

"Well, you know," he said cheerfully, "as far as looking around is concerned, going does n't necessarily take any longer than staying. In one case, you stay and look around: in the other you go and look around. That is really all the difference, is n't it?"

"Well, then, it must be a little go and a short look around. Where does one begin, in looking around a yacht?"

It would have been plain to a far duller plotter that they should be fully clear of Hunston before he explained the situation to her more definitely.

"Suppose," said Varney, "we begin with a few general remarks of a descriptive nature. This vessel, Miss Carstairs, is what is known as a schooner-rigged steam-yacht. She stands a good bit under a hundred tons. She is ninety feet long, eighteen feet in the beam and she draws ten feet —"

"I don't understand a word of that except ninety feet long, but it all has a perfectly splendid sound! But where can Mr. Hare be? Please send for him like a good host, and begin back at the beginning again. He just told me that yachts interested him intensely."

"But, unfortunately, Mr. Hare is no longer with us."

"Not with us? Why — did he *get off?*"

"He certainly did. He and Maginnis are a great pair, are n't they? Not a minute to give to pleasure or anything of that sort. I believe they slipped off to Hare's house for another of their eternal private talks."

"But —" Mary stared astoundedly. "He *said* he was going around with us! I asked him and he accepted. And besides," she went on, rolling up the count against the unhappy candidate, "he 's got my parasol!"

"We detached that from him before he left. It 's around on the other side. I 'll send for it at once."

But her puzzled frown lingered. "I have known Mr. Hare well for six years," she said, "and this is the first time I ever knew him to do such an uncivil thing."

"It was n't his fault, depend upon it. Maginnis called him back, you know, and no doubt hauled him off bodily, positively refusing to let him pause for good-byes. A man of ruthless determination, is Maginnis."

She glanced up the deck with vague uneasiness, disquieted by the unexpected situation. Forty feet away sat the sailing-master's wife still placidly knitting at her pale blue shawl, the perfect portrait of secure propriety. The sight of her there was somehow reassuring.

"So is Mr. Hare, I always believed. But never mind. How fast we are going already!"

"Yes, the *C* — this yacht goes fast."

"What is considered fast for a yacht? How long would it take us to get to New York?"

"Three hours. Why not go?"

A white-clad steward noiselessly approached with her parasol. She took it and smiled at Varney's idle pleasantry.

"Thank you, I have too many responsibilities this afternoon. First of all, we — have a guest at home. Then I simply must go to Mrs. Thurston's to see about some sewing at five. Last obstacle of all — my mamma! What would she think had happened?"

"Don't you suppose that she would guess?"

"Do you think I 'm the daughter of a clairvoyant, Mr. Varney? No, she would not guess. She would simply stand at the front window in a Sister Ann position all the afternoon, crying her pretty eyes red. But — this is a schooner-something steam-yacht, ninety feet long, I believe you said. What comes after that?"

They had left the town dock behind and were scudding swiftly. There was no longer any reason, even any pretext, for waiting. Every pulse of the *Cypriani's* machinery was beating into his brain: "Tell her now! Tell her now!"

But all at once he found it very hard to speak.

"There is time enough for that. There is something that I must tell you first — in fairness to Hare. The fact is that I — I made Peter take him away because I wanted to be alone with you."

The crude speech plainly embarrassed her; she became suddenly engrossed in examining the carved handle of her parasol, as though never in her life had she seen it before.

Varney turned abruptly from her and looked out at the flying shore.

"Last night," said he, "you may remember that you asked me a question. You asked me why I objected to accepting help from you."

"Yes, but that was last night," she interrupted, her instinct instantly warning her away from the topic — "and you did n't tell me, you know! Really — we must turn around in two minutes, and so I have n't time to talk about a thing but yachts."

"I fear that you must find time."

"Must, Mr. Varney?"

"Must. This is a matter in which you are directly concerned."

She faced him in frank wonderment. "Why, what on earth can you mean?"

"Now you must! Now you must!" sang the *Cypriani's* staunch little engines.

But he made the mistake of looking at her, and this move betrayed him. There was no doubt of him in her upturned, perplexed face, no shadow of distrust to give him strength. His earlier dread of this moment, strangely faded for a while, closed in on him once more with deadly force.

"Don't you see that I am trying to tell you and that I am finding it — hard?" he said quietly.

There was a moment's silence; then she said hurriedly: "Of course I am all in the dark as to what you — are talking about — but tell me another time, won't you? Not now, please. And oh — meantime," she sped on, with the air of hailing a new topic with acclaim, "I have something to tell you, Mr. Varney! — mystery seems to be in the air to-day. You *must* hear the strange thing that happened to me this morning. I have n't had a chance to tell you before."

"Ah, yes! That mysterious warning."

He clutched at the respite like a drowning man at straws, though no drowning man would have felt his sudden rush of self-contempt.

"Who gave it to you, and what was it about?"

Free of his hidden restraints, she had quite thrown off the embarrassment which she had felt settling down

upon her a moment before, and laughed lightly and naturally.

"It was about coming to this beautiful luncheon today — about *not* coming, I mean — and it was given to me — don't be angry — by Mr. Higginson, the old man, you know, who helped you last night."

"Ah! . . . Mr. Higginson."

"Tell me!" she said impulsively, her eyes upon his face — "I saw last night that you distrusted him — *do* you know anything about him?"

With an obvious effort he wrenched his thought from his present urgency, and brought it to focus upon a puzzle which now seemed oddly like an echo from a distant past.

"Not yet," he said, with an impassive face. "But I trust —"

"Oh, I don't like the way you say that! I don't see how you *can* be so suspicious of such a patently well-meaning old dear. And yet —"

"Well, then, tell me what he said to you and convert me."

"I suppose I must — I have had it on my mind a little, and you have a right to know. Yet I don't want to at all! For I must say it seems just a little to — to support your view. Well, then," she said, some perplexity showing beneath her smile, "it happened about eleven o'clock this morning as I was going down the street to see Elsie Marne — never dreaming of mysteries. I met Mr. Higginson walking towards our house, and we stopped, so I thought, for a friendly word. For he and I made friends last night. Oh,

you have a right to think I am too free, too easy, in the way I — I make friends with strangers, and yet really this — is not like me at all. And there is something very winning about this old man. Well, he asked me point-blank — begged me — not to come to your lunch-party to-day. What have you to say to that?"

He continued to look at her as from a distance, not answering her little laugh. Behind the grave mask of his face he cursed himself heartily for his self-absorption of the morning, which had led him entirely to lose sight of Mr. Higginson's activities last night. He had fully meant to search out that "winning" old man on his excursion to the town, but in his engrossment over the more important duty of the day, the matter had dropped completely from his mind. That the old spy had somehow ferreted out their secret was now too plain to admit a doubt. But what conceivable use did he mean to make of it? To interfere with the *Cypriani's* homegoing was beyond his power now. Did it better suit his mysterious purpose to hold back until the thing was done, in order to raise the dogs of scandal afterwards? . . .

For the moment his mind attacked the problem with curiously little spirit; but one thing at least was instantly clear. He must return to Hunston to-night, by the first train after his arrival in New York, find Higginson and call him to his well-earned reckoning. Meantime . . . here was this girl, this daughter of Uncle Elbert, whom the old sneak had for the second time failed to bend to his mean uses. . . .

"But what reason," he said mechanically, "did he give for his rather unusual request?"

"He would n't give any! That 's what makes it all so ridiculous — don't you see? Naturally I asked, but he only said in his nervous apologetic way that he was n't at liberty to tell, but that after last night I ought to consider whether you — your surroundings were likely to be quite safe. I said: 'But ought n't you to give me some idea and, if there is any danger, warn Mr. Varney and Mr. Maginnis? You can't mean that there is another plot, involving the yacht this time — the likelihood of a naval battle on the Hudson?' And then he wrung his hands and said that he could n't tell me what he meant, but that I 'd certainly regret it if I came. There! Oh, I *know* he thought he was doing somebody a kindness — you and me both, I believe! And yet — that was just a little creepy, was n't it?"

He made no answer to this; hardly heard what she said. Mr. Higginson, his works and ways, had once more slipped wholly from his mind. Something in the look of her face, its young trustfulness, its utter lack of suspicion, had already laid paralyzing hold upon him. Now a new thought possessed him; and all at once his breast was in a tumult.

"And yet," he said, with sudden fierce exultation, "*you came!*"

She colored slightly under his look and tone and, to cover it, gave a light laugh.

"Oh, yes . . dauntless person that I am! Have you the remotest idea what he was talking about? . . .

But oh, really we must turn around now! Indeed we must — I had n't noticed how far we have come. And you can show me things as we go back, can't you?"

He started at her speech; asked himself suddenly and wildly what was wrong with him. A better opening for his crushing announcement could not have been desired. Yet he stood dumb as a man of stone. One blurted phrase would commit him irrevocably, but his lips would not say it. And he was glad.

He stared over the water thinking desperately what this might mean.

In that first meeting, radiant as it had somehow seemed to him, he knew that, given this chance, he could have carried his business through without a quiver. Even last night when, he thought, things to make it harder had piled one on another like Ossa on Pelion, it would not have been impossible. Now his lips appeared sealed by a new and overwhelming reluctance; a resistless weakness saturated him through and through, seducing his will, filching away his very voice.

The *Cypriani* rattled and wheezed, and her speed sharply slackened, but he did not notice it. His mind fastened on the stark fact of his impotence like a key in a lock: his heart leapt up to meet it. He turned slowly and looked at her.

She leaned lightly upon the rail, her eyes on the water, her lashes on her cheek like a silken veil. At her breast nodded his favor, the *Cypriani's* perfect rose. In her youth, her beauty, and, most of all, her innocent

helplessness, there was something indescribably wistful, indescribably compelling: it sprang at him and possessed him. Even in permitting him her acquaintance, she had trusted him far past what he had any right to expect; and now, with his own sickening game at the touch, she gave this crowning proof of confidence in him — dashing it full in the face of the whispering and hinting Higginson, full in his own face too. Could anything in all the world matter beside the fact that this girl believed in him, that she had trusted him not only against convention, not only against his cowardly enemy, but last and biggest, *against himself?*

And she should not be disappointed. His pledge to her father was a Jephthah's oath, honorable only in the breaking. His mission, all his hours in Hunston, took changed shape before the eye of his whirling mind, monstrous, accusing, unbelievably base. Reward that trust with treachery, that faith with betrayal? Never while he lived.

Out of his turmoil came peace and light, flooding the far reaches of his soul.

In crises thought moves with the speed of light. The young man's mental revolution was over and done with in a second's time; the pause was infinitesimal. Almost as she finished her last remark, Mr. Carstairs's daughter turned from the rail and took a step forward upon the deck, as though to jog her host toward that promised tour of the yacht which had now flagged so long.

"I thought you ought to know this," she was saying,

apparently quite unaware of his descent into the psychological deeps, "though perhaps you will think it not worth repeating. But before we go on, do tell me — won't you? — is Mr. Higginson merely — *seeing things* — a sort of he-Cassandra, you know — or really do you think there is any danger?"

"No!" answered Varney, so promptly as to give the air of having waited long for just that question. "There is no danger now, thank God!"

A heavy step sounded near, approaching. Starting to speak, he broke off, turned and saw the sailing-master coming towards him. Over the intervening stretch of deck the two men looked at each other, the master nervously, Varney victoriously.

It was one of those critical moments whose importance no one can gauge until after the time for guaging is past. However, as it fell out, it was the master who spoke first.

"Very sorry, sir, indeed," he began, with a curiously uneasy and hang-dog expression. "The gear 's broke down again — in another place. Could n't possibly have been foreseen, sir. We can — hem — manage to beat about without any trouble, but I fear it would not be safe to try to push on to New York."

"To New York!" said Mary Carstairs, looking at Varney and laughing at the man's stupidity. "It certainly would not be safe at all!"

Even the furtive-glancing sailing-master was conscious of the tide of gladness that had broken into his young master's eyes.

"*Put about this instant, man!*" he cried imperiously. "Miss Carstairs wishes to return to Hunston as soon as possible."

"Right, sir," stammered the astonished Ferguson, backing away. "At once, sir."

Varney met the man's amazement steadily, laughed into it, and so turned again to his old friend's daughter. She was conscious of thinking that this was the first *happy* smile she had seen on his face since the night when he lit the lamp at Mr. Stanhope's.

"He seemed nearly stupefied because you were n't going to scold him, did you notice? I wonder if you are usually very cross with him. But on with our sightseeing! What is the name of this such-and-such a kind of steam-yacht?"

"Miss Carstairs," said Varney, struggling against his sudden exaltation for calmness and self-control — "we are both conscious that I owe you an explanation for — for what of course you must think my very extraordinary behavior. Believe me, you shall have it very soon. There is nothing in the wide world — ah — that is, I 'd like very much to give it to you now. But — no, no — it would n't be quite right — no — not fair — "

"You think I am eaten up with feminine curiosity about Mr. Higginson!" she said, a little hastily. "Oh, I 'll show you. Look! Look! We 're turning around already."

"Don't look there. Look in this general direction now and then, and tell me what you see."

"I see," she said, looking anywhere but at him,

"the strangest, the most *volatile* and — *not* excepting Mr. Higginson — the most *mysterious* man in Hollaston County!"

"Where are your eyes, Miss Carstairs? You are standing within two feet of the happiest man in America, and you don't even know it."

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH MR. HIGGINSON AND THE SAILING-MASTER BOTH MERIT PUNISHMENT, AND BOTH ESCAPE IT

Passing the town-wharf laggingly like the maimed thing she was, limping nearer and nearer the spot whence she had set out three-quarters of an hour before, Mr. Carstairs's *Cypriani* slowed down at an abandoned private landing — the same one by which Peter's trunk had been conveyed ashore that morning — and ran out her stairs.

As the two on board stood watching the yacht make fast, conversing, if the truth be known, somewhat disjointedly, they were astonished to see the great form of a man rise from a grassy bed a little way back from the river-bank and advance towards them.

"Why, look!" said Mary. "There 's Mr. Maginnis! I thought he 'd gone to town long ago."

Varney did not answer her. His eyes were glued upon Maginnis, and he called in a strange voice:

"You have been waiting for us."

"Have n't budged a step," answered Peter, moving out upon the landing. And he added what seemed an odd remark to Miss Carstairs: "I knew you were coming back."

He greeted Mary at the foot of the stairs, cordially, and begged the privilege of escorting her to any des-

tination it might be her fancy to name. But she stoutly declined his good offices, as she had Varney's a moment before, declaring that she could not think of troubling so busy and important a man.

"But where did you spirit Mr. Hare off to, if I might ask?" she said.

"On a very important mission I assure you, madam, — that is, Miss Carstairs," said Peter, diplomatically, having no idea how matters stood. "He begged me to let him go back and say good-bye to you, but I told him I 'd make it a personal matter."

"I am awfully glad that you have stopped calling me 'madam,'" said Mary, rather inconsequently. "I *did* hate it so!"

And she walked off up the woodland path, swinging her recovered parasol, and finding herself with a good deal to think about.

Peter, coming on deck, found his friend waiting for him, taut as a whipcord.

"Well, old horse!" said Maginnis. "Welcome back to jolly little Hunston."

"The machinery broke down on me," said Varney, turning away to light a cigarette.

"Sure," said Peter cheerfully. "You knew it was going to do it when you started. I read it in your eye when we said farewell forever."

"You are quite mistaken," said Varney. "Ask Ferguson."

"Oh! Then you 'll do it to-morrow morning, when the machinery is all right again?"

"No," said Varney, "nor at any other time."

The two men looked at each other steadily, unwinkingly. As the look lengthened, each face gave way to a slow reluctant smile.

"I won't pretend," said Peter, "that I am disappointed in you. I never dreamed that I hated this thing till the time came, and hang me if I don't rather like that little girl."

"It was a thing," said Varney, "that simply could n't be done. We were a pair of asses not to see that all along." He glanced hurriedly at his watch and started for the companionway. "Jove! I 'll have to hustle."

"Hustle! Where the devil to?"

"I 'm off to New York by the five o'clock train to tell Uncle Elbert that I 've resigned. I 'll feel mighty mean doing it, too."

"Well, don't anticipate trouble," called Peter dryly. "You can't feel mean by the five o'clock train, however much you may deserve —"

"Why not?"

"There is n't any. She goes through at four-seven. You 'll have to compose yourself to wait till eight-ten, unless you want to walk."

Varney halted at the head of the companionway, surprisingly disappointed. From the moment when the *Cypriani* had put about, he had been insistently conscious that his first duty now was to see Mr. Carstairs, beg absolution from his promise, and formally surrender his commission. So only, he had felt, could he go on with clean hands.

"Well, don't look so glum over it," said Peter.

"You 're not any sorrier about your prolonged stay in our midst than I am."

Varney turned an inquiring eye upon him, and he began walking rather restlessly up and down the deck.

"Oh, this same old rot!" he broke out impatiently. "I 'll never be easy in my mind till you are back in New York, and *stay* there —"

"Well, well, Peter! Stick it out for three hours more —"

"Not long after you and Miss Carstairs steamed off," continued Peter, "Hare blew back down here, tired of waiting and a little excited. He had just heard some passing whispers about you and me. He says there seems to be a little suppressed excitement in town this afternoon."

"Why, I thought your paper had kicked all that nonsense into a cocked hat."

"A lot of people don't believe the paper, though," said Peter. "On the contrary they believe that you are Stanhope and that you bought the *Gazette* to disown yourself and save your hide. A foolish idea, but it has doubtless been helped out by whispers from higher up. Smith's selling out has made Ryan see red. Smith 's still in town, by the way, which argues a good deal of cool nerve on his part. Hare hears that Ryan is in a murdering humor —"

"You seem to forget entirely that Stanhope — the real, the genuine, double-extry-guaranteed — has appeared, to bear his own —"

"But Hunston does n't know it yet!" exclaimed Peter. "Kindly get that well into your head. All

these Hackleys and Orricks still think that you 're their meat — Where 're you going? "

Varney, pausing at the hatch, deliberated whether he should say anything to Peter about Mr. Higginson's latest and most daring intrusion, and declared for the negative. " There 's no reason," he mused, " why I should let him in on this. And besides — "

" To town," he said aloud. " I 've got to send a telegram to Uncle Elbert. He 's very much on my conscience — poor old chap! "

" I 'll go with you. Got a Reform Committee meeting at five-thirty. And some other business."

But Varney had already disappeared below. Peter picked up his splendid guitar and, sprawling upon the transom, gave himself up to soft humming and, presently, to the work of composition. Soon, after some little painstaking effort, he produced the following, to be rendered to the tune of " Yankee Doodle ":

The tale of crime is at an end,
For little Laurence Va-arney
Declines to swipe his loidy friend
Upon the *Cypria-a-ani*!

Peter tried this over to himself with considerable satisfaction. He possessed a remarkably sweet tenor and pleasurably anticipated singing his ditty to its hero, and doubtless getting a cushion pitched at his head for his pains. But it happened that Varney was to go to his grave without ever hearing that small chanson.

He came on deck again in five minutes with a face

which drove all thoughts of melody from Peter's head. In fact, at sight of it, he came instantly to a sitting position and his guitar slid unheeded to the floor.

"What 's happened?"

Varney did not answer immediately. He stood at the rail and stared into the woods with fixed eyes which saw nothing. Peter rose and came towards him.

"Out with it!" he said encouragingly. "I 'm full partner here. You want to murder somebody. Well and good! Now who is it?"

Varney turned towards him, half-reluctantly, and spoke in a quiet voice.

"I told you just now that the machinery broke down. I was mistaken. It was broken down."

"*Broken down?*"

"When I went below," continued the younger man, "it occurred to me to look in the engine-room and see how bad the damage was. It was very bad indeed. I 'm no mechanic, Lord knows, but a child could make no mistake here. The effect is about as if somebody had jammed a crowbar in the works while she was running full-tilt. Probably that is just what somebody did. It 'll be some days before she 'll run again."

Peter's bewilderment deepened. "What in the world does this mean?"

"Treachery," said Varney calmly. "Somebody on board has been bought."

The two men stared at each other. Varney read on Peter's face the swift unfolding of precisely his own thought. He was rather surprised at Peter's quickness, in view of the fact that he knew nothing of the episode of the morning.

"Yes," he said. "That 's the man."

He told concisely of Mr. Higginson's attempt to break up the lunch-party by keeping the guest of honor away. Peter's face, as he listened, underwent a curious change. It first slowly gained color, then slowly lost it; and all of it, from the top of his forehead to the end of his chin, seemed subtly to contract and tighten up.

His comment at the end was: "Excuse me a minute."

Upon which he vanished below to see with his own eyes and judge with his own brain. He was back in less than two minutes, with a tiny spot of red in the corner of his eye, and his manner unwontedly calm.

"You 're right. Pretty clumsy treachery that," he said, standing and staring at Varney, who had dropped into a chair. "What was the man thinking about to . . . I don't begin to see bottom on this."

Varney's eyes were on the sailing-master, who sat far forward, feet on the rail, apparently engrossed in a magazine. The young man had just recalled the master's curious manner when he notified him of the accident to the machinery.

"Larry — you meant to turn around anyway?"

"But Higginson, you see, could n't predict that."

"The immediate cause of your turning — "

"Was the little mishap to our gear."

He raised his voice: "Ferguson! I 'd like a word with you if you please."

The sailing-master jumped at the sound of the voice as though it had shot a projectile into his back. How-

ever, he rose at once and came forward in his usual, brisk, stiff way, halting before the two men with a salute. Varney eyed him inscrutably.

"I believe you were in town for a while this morning, Ferguson?"

"Yes, sir, I was."

"While there did you chance to see anything of an elderly gentleman, a stranger here, by the name of Higginson?"

Though he had the look of being braced for trouble, the man changed color at the direct question, and his eyes instantly shifted. With an evident effort he recaptured something like his usual steadiness and spoke in a voice of elaborate thoughtfulness.

"Higginson? No, sir. I know no one of that name."

"Ah? I thought not. I asked on the mere chance. And oh, Ferguson."

"Sir?"

"I have just been down to look at the damaged machinery. Ignorant of these matters myself, I can naturally make little of it. You will prepare a written report for Mr. Carstairs, explaining in detail the nature of the accident, and in particular just how it took place."

"Very good, sir."

"And — oh, Ferguson."

"Yes, sir?"

"As the — er — mishap appears to be so serious, I think it best to have an expert from town advise with me before the work of repairing begins. You will

therefore leave matters just as they are until I instruct you otherwise."

"Oh — very good, sir."

Peter turned his dissatisfied eyes from the back of the retreating sailing-master to Varney.

"What better proof d'you want than the rogue's face? Why did n't you fire him on the spot?"

"I neither hire nor fire here," said Varney. "These are Mr. Carstairs's employees. He will have to deal with them as he thinks best."

He rose immediately and put on his hat.

"With Mr. Higginson, however," he mused, starting for the stair, "the case is altogether different."

"Exactly," said Peter with great heartiness.

As one man they descended the stairs, crossed the battered landing and struck rapidly up the woodland path for Remsen Street and the town. As they walked, Varney silently condemned the unfailing genius of the Irish for intruding themselves into all the trouble that hove upon the horizon. It was with acute pleasure that he recalled, before long, his friend's engagement for half-past five. For he himself had but three hours left in Hunston that day, and he had an urgent use for them — beyond even Mr. Higginson.

"I confess once more," said Peter, tramping heavily, "that this chap is too many for me. I don't seem to grasp his game."

"And you call yourself a conspirator, Peter! Why, this is A B C."

"All right. I 'm listening. Spell it out for me."

"Suppose the gang here is deep enough, as you think, to plan a little rough-house, ostensibly for my benefit, but really to get you into it and thus wipe you out. Does n't it occur to you that my fading away to New York at the critical moment would rather knock the bottom out of the scheme? Why, it 's as clear as noonday! Higginson, learning somehow that I expected to fly off immediately after the lunch-party, first tries to break up the party, and failing that, he bribes Ferguson to break up the machinery. Thus he hopes to make it impossible for me to get away — me whom he needs in his business as the red rag for his little old mob."

They had emerged from the woods and walked a block up Remsen Street before Peter replied.

"By Jove! That does seem to explain everything! That 's it! It 's Higginson, not Smith, who has been pulling all these wires from the beginning. I suspected the man the first minute I ever clapped eyes on him. But where do you suppose he got his hint?"

"Hammerton?"

"Never. That boy is trustworthy, or I 'll eat my hat."

"Well, I think so too. Then he simply corrupted Ferguson and wormed the whole thing out of him. Pretty clever, the whole thing, was n't it? How much Ferguson may really know, or suspect, I have no idea. Of course, there is only one thing to fear now, and that is scareheads in the New York papers to-morrow — attempted kidnapping foiled, and so on. It would break Uncle Elbert's heart if anything of that sort should come out —"

"Don't you worry. It won't. I 'll close his trap — tight."

Once more Varney was slightly annoyed by Peter's presence.

"If we find him," he began, as they came to the square, "you — "

"We must try not to be brutal, Larry," warned Peter soberly. "I remind myself that he is an elderly man — "

"If we find him," began Varney again, "you will please remember that he belongs to me. Higginson is strictly my pickings."

Peter grunted, looking rather annoyed too.

They crossed the square, two determined-looking men, and entered the Palace Hotel. Behind the desk a bored clerk sat paring his nails with a pair of office scissors. He looked up with a certain resentfulness.

"Excuse my interruption," said Varney. "Is Mr. Higginson in?"

The clerk's glance lowered tiredly. "Naw. Left town on the four-seven."

"I don't believe it," said Peter instantly.

There followed a silence. So stern were the gazes fastened upon the clerk that, looking hastily up at Peter's word, he promptly lost something of his lordly demeanor and became for the moment almost human.

"Well, sir, he 's left *us*. *Said* he was takin' the four-seven."

"Where did he go?" demanded Varney.

"Don't know, sir, but I think to New York."

"You must know where he checked his baggage to."

"Did n't have any baggage, sir," protested the clerk. "Only his suit-case."

"Did he leave no address for the forwarding of his mail?"

"Naw, sir. He did not."

"Of course not. Why on earth should he?" said Peter.

Desisting from the absent but fierce stare with which he was transfixing the clerk, he drew Varney hurriedly aside.

"All bluff!" he stated positively. "Is it likely, after *his* day's work, that he 'd be lolling around the lobby waiting for us to call? He 's *moved!* But depend on it, he 's got more work to do, and he *has n't left town!*"

"If that 's so, where do you recommend looking?"

Peter made a large gesture. "That 's a horse of another color. I told you he had a faculty for disappearing into a hole and pulling the hole in after him. If anybody besides Ryan knows where he is, I should say that it might be Miss Carstairs. She seems to be his only friend on our side of the fence, since I tipped Hare off."

Varney all but jumped. "I 'll ask her!" he offered almost precipitately. "The very thing!"

"It is quite possible," continued Peter, tensely thoughtful, "that the old rascal has sneaked to her since the luncheon, to try to pump something out of her about our movements — even within the bounds of possibility that he is with her at this moment —"

"A great suggestion!" said Varney cordially. "You certainly have a head on you, Peter. Of course, on

the other hand, it is quite possible that he *has* skipped — made a bee-line for Newspaper Row. In that case, I 'll see if she — Miss Carstairs, you know — if she knows his address in New York, and I 'll hunt him up to-night."

Peter, glancing at his watch, discovered that he was already fifteen minutes late for his committee meeting.

" For this afternoon, then," he said, unwillingly, " you can have him, if you can find him. After to-day, though, he belongs to me. Wherever he is now, he 'll certainly be back on the job to-morrow. Well — I 'll leave you, then. Er — Larry. It 's just as well not to be prowling around after dark by yourself, you know. I 'll be back at the yacht early and we 'll have dinner together before your train. Say six-thirty, eh? "

" I 'll be there."

Peter hurried off for Hare's house with a mingled sense of unjustly baffled vengeance and vague uneasiness. Varney, drawing a long breath of relief, headed for the telegraph office, whence he dispatched the following telegram to Mr. Carstairs:

" Plan permanently abandoned. Arrive in New York by train 9.20 to-night. Expect me ten minutes later."

That done, he started rapidly down Remsen Street with a steadily mounting spirit.

CHAPTER XX

VARNEY, HAVING EMBARKED UPON A CRIME, FINDS OUT THAT THERE IS A PRICE TO PAY

There was a fine old hedge of box bordering the Carstairs lawn, old rosebushes inside it and many flowering shrubs. Splendid oaks curtained the big white house on either side, shading the expanse of close-clipped turf. At the left, a fountain-sprayer now whirled a mist of water over the trim grass, and far to the rear a man in rubber boots was hosing off a phaeton before a carriage house. On the back porch, an elderly cook was peeling potatoes and gently crooning some old ballad of Erin.

It was a serene and reassuring scene. Yet upon the spacious piazza, which undeniably contributed to the pervading air of all 's well, the stunning information came to Varney that the lady of his quest was not at home. Nor could the maid at the door say where her young mistress had gone, or with whom, or when she would return. Possibly Mrs. Carstairs knew, but Mrs. Carstairs was unwell and could not be disturbed. Miss Carstairs would be sorry to miss him, the kind-hearted girl opined, and would he please leave his name?

The young man descended the steps in a state of the flattest depression. Disappointment, he reflected

bitterly, crowded upon the heels of disappointment on this anticlimactic afternoon which yet should have been, in a bigger sense, so gloriously climactic. He had missed his train, and with it his honorable confession to Mr. Carstairs; missed Higginson; last and worst of all — it seemed to him now that this was all that mattered in the least — he had missed Miss Carstairs. In sooth, the world was all awry.

But at the gate, a thought came to him, radiant as a heavenly messenger. Miss Carstairs was at her seamstress's on the Remsen road. Had she not told him with her own lips that she was to be there at this hour?

He made a *Te Deum* of the click of the gate, and turned northward a face which bore record of an inner splendor.

He had set out to see Miss Carstairs in order to ask of her if she knew the whereabouts, in Hunston or New York, of the fair-spoken yet elusive Higginson. But with every step he found the force of this errand weakening within him. The memory of that gentleman's villany, so burning a moment since, grew steadily fainter and more inconsequential. Failing to locate him, he would of course make a precautionary round of the newspaper offices in New York that night. At the worst, he told himself with the swift fading of his anger, there was only a remote risk of any unpleasant aftermath. Why, the thing was over and done with — let by-gones be by-gones. As for those other matters supposed to be upon his mind — hints of approaching trouble for himself, and the knowledge of Mr. Car-

stairs's bitter disappointment over the collapse of his all but triumphant scheme — he could not for the life of him give them any attention whatever.

A far nearer and more vital matter was pressing upon his mind and heart.

To tell her everything at the moment when the yacht had swung back and he had thrown up his commission forever had been his first strong impulse. He had crushed it down only because he saw that to speak then was to take her at an ungenerous disadvantage. Now Fortune had sent him this new meeting, to be untrammeled by any such restraints. No grim duty governed his movements now; no consciousness of secret chicanery any longer enfolded him like a pall. Already the thought of what he had meant to do came back to him hazily, like the plot of a half-forgotten play. The hobgoblins in a nightmare seemed not more unreal to him now. His heart sang with the knowledge that he was to see her again, this time with no shadow between.

Two nights' rain had left the road dustless: it was silent and empty. All about him fell the pleasant evening noises of the wood, but he did not hear them. As he walked, his mind was rehearsing the whole story of his coming to Hunston, as he was now free to confess it to Uncle Elbert's daughter. That she would forgive him he never entertained a doubt. For he would throw himself wholly on her mercy — telling her everything, painting himself as blackly as he could — and suing for pardon only because he had failed.

But when suddenly he saw her, sooner than he had expected, his polished and elaborate phrases dropped

from his mind as cleanly as had the recollection of the roguery of Higginson.

It was at that hour when the skies remember the set sun in a gold and pink glow. A little kink in the road straightened out under his swift feet, and a small cottage in a fair-sized lawn jumped out of the woods into vision, almost upon him. On the small square porch, her back to the road, stood Miss Carstairs, talking through the open window to some one in the room beyond.

Varney, having stopped short at the first sudden sight of her, walked on very slowly. Her voice came to him distinctly, and now and then he caught scattering words of what she was saying. She wore her blue dress of the luncheon and the hat which Mrs. Marne, and others, had so admired; and she gave him the odd impression of being somehow *older* than she had ever seemed before. . . . Yet she was ten years his junior and three days ago, at this very hour, he had never so much as laid eyes upon her.

"I 'll come Saturday morning, then," she was saying, "and you 'll certainly have them ready for me, won't you? Good-bye."

She turned from the window, came towards the steps. At the top of them, she saw Varney standing at the gate, not twenty yards away, and stopped dead. Then she came on down the stairs, down the graveled walk towards him.

"I 'm going away at eight o'clock," he began without greeting, striving to make his voice casual. "I went to your house first — and — "

"You — followed me here?"

"Yes," he said, unsmiling. "I had to see you before I went — on matters of business — and —"

She was nearer to him now: for the first time he could see her eyes. In them lay a faint shadowiness like the memory of shed tears; but sweeping over that and blotting it out he saw a look which struck him like a blow.

"There is nothing for you to see me about, I think — any more," she said with a little laugh. "The game is up — is n't that what they say in melodrama? My mother has told me all about it."

"Your mother has *told you!*" he echoed stupidly, as one to whom the words conveyed no meaning.

"She had not expected to see me so soon again, when I went off to lunch on my father's yacht. The surprise was a little too much for her. You must try to forgive her," said Mary, and punctuated the observation with a small, final bow. "Will you open the gate for me?"

"No," said Varney, pulling himself sharply together. "Not like that."

The shock of her voice and look, even more than her words, had been stunning in their first unexpectedness. But now he remembered, with infinite relief, that of course she did not understand the matter at all; of course she would speak and look very differently when he had made his explanation.

"You think," Varney said, "that I *mind* your knowing about our poor little plot — that I am found out and my plans are all upset? How on earth could you

think that? Why, that 's all like something in another life. Don't you know what my being here at this moment means? The thing is all over, Miss Carstairs — all past and done with an hour before you ever saw your mother. I gave it up voluntarily. When the time came, just now on the yacht, I found out that it was impossible — unthinkable — I could n't do it. The game was up then. That is one thing that your mother could not tell you, and it was to tell you this, and all the rest of it, that I followed you here."

She stood on the other side of the gate, hardly an arm's length from him, looking at him; a figure so pretty, so dainty, so extremely decorative that she seemed incapable of giving anything but pleasure. But in the eyes that met his own so unwaveringly, he read at once the contradiction of this.

"Yes, I suppose that would always be the way, would n't it? — that whenever I found out, you were just going to tell me?"

If she had searched her mind for a way to strangle his headlong self-defence, she could not possibly have done it more effectually. There followed a horrible pause.

"You mean . . . that you do not believe me?"

"In the little while that I have known you, have you given me much reason to?"

"Can't you see that that is exactly the reason I wanted to tell you all the truth now?"

"Why did you wait till *now?* Were n't there chances to tell me this afternoon on my father's yacht? But — there 's no use to speak of all this. It is enough that I know it now."

He was aware that her voice had lost that hard and polished lightness with which she had first struck at him; on this last sentence, he thought that it trembled a little; and in a flash, he saw the whole matter from her side of it, and for the moment ceased to think about himself.

He leaned his arms upon the green panel of the gate and looked down at her.

"Don't think that I blame you for not taking my word. Probably I could n't expect it. We can't very well argue about that. . . . And of course I have known all along — how you would feel about me, when you found out what I came here to do. I was ready for that — ready for you to be angry. But I don't seem to have taken it in that you would be . . . hurt. That makes it a good deal worse."

She made no reply. She had lowered her heavy-fringed eyes; her slim, gloved hands were busily furling and unfurling her white parasol.

"There is nothing in this that need hurt you. Believe me in this, at any rate. Only three people are concerned in it. You will have no doubt of your mother. That she told you shows how impossible it was to her, even with Uncle Elbert wanting you so much. You will not mind about your father — not in any personal way. He is a stranger to you. That leaves only me."

Still she said nothing. It seemed to him that he had never looked at so still a face.

"For me, I might make you angry as any — acquaintance might — any stranger. But that is all. It is not . . . as if we had been friends."

She raised her eyes, and the look in them seemed to give the lie to every word he had said.

"What do you call a friend? Did I not trust you — put myself in your power — fall confidingly in with your hateful plot — after I had been plainly warned not to? Oh, if I had only listened to Mr. Higginson, I should not have the humiliation of remembering that — hour on the yacht!"

The name stung him into instant recollection. He stood staring at her, and his face darkened.

In the first staggering revelation of her look, his sub-conscious mind had leapt instantly to the conclusion that his cunning enemy, having found out his secret, had betrayed it to Miss Carstairs. Her first words had disposed of that. It was the tortured mother, not the professional sneak, who had been before him with his explanation. But now it rushed over him that he had an infinitely deeper grudge against the vanished spy. For it was Higginson, with his bribe-money, who had broken down the yacht; Higginson who would, in any case, have forced the return to Hunston; Higginson who had given this girl the right to think, as she did think, that she owed her escape wholly to an "accident" to the machinery.

He had thought that he had saved Uncle Elbert's daughter from himself, and lo, his enemy had plucked the honor from him. The world should not be big enough for this man to elude his vengeance.

"You mention Mr. Higginson. Where is he?"

She glanced at him, impersonally, struck by the unconscious sternness of his voice.

"I do not know, but I am most anxious to see him — to thank him —"

"I am told that he left town at four o'clock. Perhaps you know his address in New York?"

"I do not," she answered coldly. "No doubt he went away hurriedly . . . frightened of you because of his kindness to me."

She came a step forward to the gate. Instantly his thought veered back to her and his tense face softened.

"How can I blame you," he said hurriedly, "for thinking the worst of me? I've been thinking badly enough of myself, God knows. But don't you know, can't you imagine, that nothing could have held me to the miserable business a single moment after I saw you, had I not been bound by a solemn promise to your poor father?"

"My father! Oh, if he is the sort of man to plot a thing like this, and to bludgeon my mother into it, how could you endure to *promise* to do it for him?"

"Because he is breaking his heart for you, and you didn't know it. It seemed right that he should see you, since he wants to so much."

All her sense of the wrong he had done her flared up in anger at that. "How do *you* — *dare* say what seems right between my father and me? He is breaking his heart for me, he told you? Did he mention to you that she had *broken* hers for him? Don't you suppose that I have had time — and reasons — to decide which of them I belong to?"

"All this," he said, "was before I knew you."

About them hung the stillness of the country and the long empty road. The woods stirred; a bird called; a portly hare poked his nose through the brush over the way, and suddenly scuttled off, his white flag up. In Mrs. Thurston's yard, the quiet was profound.

"All his life," said Mary Carstairs, "my father has thought about nothing but himself. I am sorry for him — but he must take the consequences of that now. If he is lonely, it is his own making. If my mother has been lonely till it has almost killed her, that is his doing, too. For you — there was never any place in this. As for me, I owe him nothing. He must beg my mother's forgiveness before he shall ever get mine."

She came forward another half-step and laid her hand upon the gate-latch with a movement whose definiteness did not escape him.

"You may take back that answer from me if you wish. And so, good-bye."

"Not good-bye," said Varney, instantly. "You must not say that."

"I am quite sure that I have nothing else left to say."

Her eyes went past him over the gate, out into the wood beyond. Dusk was falling about them; it shaded her face, intangibly altered it, made it for the moment almost as he had known it before. She looked very young, and tired. This was the picture of her, and he knew it then as he looked at her, that he would carry with him to the longest day he lived.

"Is it nothing to you," he cried in a rush, "that

when the time came I could n't do it? The yacht's breaking down had nothing in the world to do with it. I had already decided to turn back, to break my promise. That the — accident happened just then was only a wretched chance. I was going to put about at that moment."

She hesitated almost imperceptibly, seemed for a brief second to waver. But perhaps she dared not let herself believe him now: perhaps the strongest wish of her heart was to hurt him as deeply as she could.

"To say the least," she said with a little deliberate movement of distaste, "your coincidences are unfortunate. You — won't mind if I go on being grateful to the — *gear?*"

Under that crowning taunt, his self-restraint snapped like an overstretched bowstring.

"You shall not say that. You shall not. Miss Carstairs, you *know* I could have kept you on the yacht if I had wanted to. You *know* how I gave the order to put about and bring you back to Hunston. Did I look in the least then like a man whose hopes and plans had been ruined? You know I did not. You know I said to you that I — I was the happiest man in America. Will you tell me what on earth that could mean — except that I had decided to give up a thing that has been a millstone around my neck ever since — I met you?"

She made no reply, did not look at him. The dusk shadowed her eyes; and whether her silence meant good or ill he could not tell.

"You cannot answer, you see. We both know why. You will not be fair to me, Miss Carstairs. It is that night in the Academy box-office over again. Because I *had* to deceive you once — not for my own sake — you will not look at the plain facts. But in your heart — just like that other night — *I know you believe me.*"

Of course she could not let that pass now. "I do not!" she said. "I do not. I must ask you, please, not to keep me here any longer."

Varney's face went a shade paler. Arguing about his own veracity was even less bearable than he had thought; his manner all at once became singularly quiet.

"The merest moment, if you will. I can prove what I say," he answered slowly, "but of course I won't do that. You must believe what *I* say, believe *me*. Nothing else matters but that. . . . Don't you know that it took a very strong reason to make me break faith with my old friend, your father — to make me stand here begging to be believed, like this? You have only to look at me, I think. Don't you know that I could n't possibly deceive you now . . . after what has happened to me?"

"I don't know what you mean. I don't understand. Don't tell me. Nothing has happened . . ."

"Everything has happened," he said still more quietly. "I 've fallen crazily in love with you."

She did not lift her eyes; neither moved nor spoke; gave no sign that she had heard. He went on slowly:

"This — might be hard to believe, except that it

must be so easy to see. I've known you less than three days, and I never wanted to — even like you. My one idea was to think of you as my enemy. That was what Maginnis and I agreed — plotting together like a pair of nihilists. It all seems so preposterous now. Everything was against me from the beginning. I would n't face it till to-day, this afternoon. Then it all came over me in a rush, and, of course, your happiness became a great deal more to me than your father's. So we turned around, and it was then that I told you how happy I was. Did n't you know then what I meant? Of course it was because I had just found out . . . how you were the one person in the world who mattered to me."

There was a long silence. It deepened, grew harder to break. Little Jenny Thurston, watching these two through an upstairs shutter, marveled what adults found to say to each other in these interminable colloquies. A young cock-sparrow, piqued by their stillness, alighted on the fence near by and studied them, eye cocked inquisitively.

"Of course, I'm not — asking anything," said Varney. "About this, I mean. I am answered, and over-answered, already. But . . . do you believe now that I — voluntarily gave it up?"

"Oh," said Mary, "you — you must not ask me that. You must not talk to me like this. I did trust you once — fully — when you were almost a stranger; last night — and then this afternoon —"

"Do you believe me," said Varney, "or do you not?"

Her lower lip was trembling very slightly, and she set her white teeth upon it. The sudden knowledge that she was near to tears terrified her, goaded her to lengths. She gathered all her pride of opinion and young sense of wrong and frightened feminine instinct, for a final desperate stand; and so flung at him more passionately than she knew: "How many times must I tell you? *I do not! I do not!*"

Varney gave her a last look, stamping her face upon his mind, and took a step backward from the gate.

"Then," said he . . . "this is good-bye, indeed."

Presently Mary raised her eyes. He had turned southward, toward the town, but at a pace so swift that he was already far down the road. A jutting curve came soon, and he vanished behind it, out of her sight.

Dusk was falling fast on the wood now. The green of the trees deepened and blackened, turning into a crooked smudge upon the sky-line. The road fell between them like a long gray ribbon. Nothing was to be seen upon it; nothing was to be heard but the rustle of the early night wind and the pleasant sounds of the open road.

Varney's mind as he walked, was a blank white wall. He had forgotten Elbert Carstairs, forgotten the train he was to take, forgotten even the unendurable injury that Higginson had put upon him. His one blind instinct had been to get away as quickly and completely as possible. But now, slowly, it was borne in upon him that he knew this road, that he had walked it once before like this, at the end of the day. His first night

in Hunston — he remembered it all very well. It must have been just here — or here — that the rain had caught him, and he had gone on to meet *her*.

The cottage which had sheltered them that night must be close at hand. His eyes, which had been upon the ground, lifted and went off down the road. They fell upon the dark figure of a man, shuffling slowly along in the gloom, not twenty yards ahead of him.

He was an old man, shambling and gray-whiskered, and stooped as he walked. If he was aware that another wayfarer followed close behind, he gave no sign. Suddenly he stopped short with a feeble exclamation, and began peering about the ground at his feet. The young man was up with him directly, and his vague impression of recognition suddenly became fitted to a name.

"Orrick?"

The bowed form straightened and turned. Through the thickening twilight the two men looked at each other.

"You were not by any chance waiting for me?"

The darkness hid old Orrick's eyes; he shook his head slowly a number of times. "I passed you when you was at Miz Thurston's, sir. I can' walk fas' like you can." And he bent down over the road again.

"What 's the matter with you?" asked Varney. "Have you lost something?"

"Los' my luck-piece," said the other, slowly, not looking up. "I was carryin' it in my hand 's I come along an' it jounced out. A 1812 penny it was an' vallyble."

He cut rather a pitiful figure, squatting down in the dirt and squinting about with short-sighted old eyes; and Varney felt unaccountably sorry for him.

"I would n' los' my luck-piece for nothin'," he added, dropping to his knees. "I 'm a kind of a stoop'sitious man, an' I allus was."

"Perhaps I can help you; my eyes are good."

He went back a step or two, bending down and scrutinizing the brown earth. Orrick, presently announcing that the coin might have rolled, made a slow way across the road on his knees, patting the ground with his hand as he moved. Near the edge of it, half in the woods, lay a thick piece of split firewood, long as a man's arm and stouter. The knotted old fingers stealthily closed on it.

"It could n't have rolled far on this soft road," said Varney presently. "Just where do you think you dropped it?"

Sam Orrick rose behind his stooping figure with upraised club, a blaze of triumph in his sodden old eyes.

"There!" he cried with a senseless laugh. "It 's *there,* Stanhope!"

The club fell with a thud; and Varney, meeting it as he straightened up, toppled over like a log, face downward.

Old Orrick stared down at the prostrate figure, and presently touched it with his tattered foot. It did not stir. His fierce joy died. He looked about him apprehensively, and his eye fell at once upon a dim-lit cottage off the road just back of him. *His* cottage — how had he forgotten that? Was that dark thing — a man —

standing there at the gate? Suddenly a great terror seized the old man. He threw his stick into the woods and slunk away, toward the town. A loud yell from behind brought his heart to his throat, and he broke into a wild, lumbering run.

CHAPTER XXI

MR. FERRIS STANHOPE MEETS HIS DOUBLE; AND LETS THE DOUBLE MEET EVERYTHING ELSE

In the new-made study of his Remsen road cottage, Ferris Stanhope, Hunston's returned celebrity, sat under a green-shaded lamp and frowned down at a sheaf of his own neat manuscript. Behind him, in a corner, books and various knick-knacks lay spilled over the floor around an open trunk. The room was, in fact, in the litter incident to getting to rights. But this did not act as a stay on the great man's habit of industry, which happened to be of the most persistent variety.

The study blinds were drawn, and the rest of the house was in darkness. The author noted three emendations upon his manuscript, made three more. Then, with a muttered exclamation, he stripped off the interlined sheet altogether, tore it into shreds, threw the shreds on the floor and reached for a pad of white paper. At that moment he became aware of footsteps and heavy breathing in the hall, and looked up inquiringly.

His man-servant, Henry, was standing in the doorway, the long limp body of a man in his arms.

Mr. Stanhope sprang hurriedly to his feet. In his

face the servant saw that same odd look of fleeting anxiety which he had noted there when they descended from the train that morning.

"In the name of heaven — what have you there?"

"Harskin' your pardon, sir," gasped Henry, staggering into the room, "I 'm honcertain whether 'e 's kilt or not. Struck down from behind by an old codger with long 'air and gray whiskers. Hi was at the gate —"

"But what do you mean by hauling the carcass in here? Do you think I 'm running a private morgue?"

Henry, who had been in his present employment a bare month, came to a wobbly pause, surprised. The body grew very heavy in his stout arms. Now the man's head slid off Henry's shoulder and tumbled backwards, hanging down in the full glow of the lamp.

"Hi thought, sir —" began the servant with panting dignity.

"O my God!" said the author suddenly.

Henry, who had not had a look at his burden, misunderstood.

"Ghastly sight, hain't it, sir — that bloody gash on 'is 'ead?"

"Quick! Put him on the sofa. — Now some water."

The servant, whose limbs were numb from the long carry, obeyed with alacrity. But returning hurriedly with the water, he was met at the door by his perverse master, who took the glass from his hands with the curt announcement that that would do.

Henry looked as displeased as his subservient posi-

tion made advisable. "Hif you please, sir, I have quite a 'and with the hinjured and —"

"He 's only stunned," said his master impatiently. "I 'll attend to him myself."

And he banged the door in the servant's face.

The man lay on the lounge precisely as Henry had happened to place him, his averted face half buried in the pillows. Investigation showed that he had no bloody gash on his head: that was Henry's imagination. There did not, in fact, seem to be a mark on him beyond three small scratches on his forehead.

Stanhope put his hand under the chin and turned it toward him, none too gently. For a full moment he stood motionless, staring down at that white face so like his own. Then he dipped his hand in the glass, and splashed a handful of water upon the closed eyes.

At the first touch of it, the still figure of the injured man stirred with faint signs of returning consciousness. Far down in a black and utter void, he sensed the first glimmer of distant light. Slowly, slowly, the glimmer grew. The silence within gave place to a vast roaring in his ears and indescribable pain in his head; and the dull glow which had seemed to him the shining frontier of some far new world whither he was gratefully journeying, resolved itself into a circle of greenish light.

"Drink this," said a soft but peremptory voice.

He drank, incuriously; and the fiery liquid ran to his head and heart and shot new life into his dead limbs. But the more his lost strength came back to his body, the more he was aware of the terrible pain in his head.

It occurred to him vaguely that when once he opened his eyes, which he would have to do some time, there would be a horrible explosion and his head would go off like a sky-rocket.

"You feel better now," asserted rather than inquired the voice.

"Much. Thanks to you. It 's only — my head. Something seems to be wrong with it, a little."

"Somebody hit you there with a club, from behind. You remember now, don't you? Who was it?"

"I don't know," said Varney wearily.

"Oh, come! Your head is n't as bad as all that — there 's not even a bump on it. Think a moment. An old man, with long hair and gray whiskers. You must know who it was."

Varney pressed his hand upon his racking forehead. "Oh! So it was he — then. Poor old Orrick."

The author's face lost something of its color. "Orrick! . . . What — what has this fellow got against you?"

Varney did not answer. The name had started remote memories to working, and, very slowly, returning comprehension advanced to meet them. He and old Orrick had been standing together on a woodland road. They were hunting for something. An 1812 penny and valuable. That was it. Before that, he had stood a long time near a green gate somewhere, looking at a pair of dark-blue eyes. He remembered distinctly what merciless eyes they were, though something in a far corner of his mind recalled that he had once, oddly enough, associated them with pleasant things.

Then, like one rounding a sharp corner in a driveway, his memory came face to face with everything; and he turned his head to the wall.

But there was no escape from that insistent voice, so eager for an explanation. A hand fell upon his shoulder, shook it almost roughly. "Don't let yourself drop off again. Here! You want another drink?"

"No, I 'm quite all right now — thank you."

To prove it, and to make ready to get away where he could be quiet, he performed the herculean task of opening his eyes. A tall man was bending over him, an anxious expression on his handsome face. More than the liquor, more even than the jostling hand upon his shoulder, the look of that face, so strange yet so familiar, braced Varney to action.

The two pairs of gray-blue eyes, so oddly matched in tint and shape, stared into each other steadily. Presently Varney dragged his feet around to the floor, with difficulty, as was natural to their thousand tons of weight, and taking hold of a chair pulled himself up on them. He raised his hands, slowly and cautiously, to his head. Good! It was still there. The impression that it had left his shoulders and was floating around in the air a foot or two above them thus turned out to be an illusion.

"There!" he heard the author saying briskly. "A little effort was all you needed, as I thought."

"That was all. Thank you. You must have pulled me in from the road, did n't you? It was very kind. You have just arrived in Hunston — I believe?"

"I came only this morning," his good Samaritan

replied. "In the nick of time, it seems, to be of assistance. And you?" he added, with a slight bow. "You are a native here, perhaps?"

"Do you remember me," asked Varney quietly, "when you were here twelve years ago?"

Mr. Stanhope selected a cigarette from a large open box on the table, lit it carefully, took several long inhalations. "No," he said easily. "But for that matter, I fear that I remember few of my boyhood acquaintances in Hunston. But — this man — Orrick, you said? — has there been bad blood between you two for some time then?"

"No," said Varney, simply. "He struck me, I believe, because he thought I was you?"

"*What!*" cried the author with overdone surprise.

"I am glad — to meet you so soon after your arrival," continued Varney. "Some one should tell you that your boyhood acquaintances have longer memories. You came here for your health, I believe? I think you might do well to leave for the same reason."

Stanhope's eyes became little slits behind his trim glasses. "What do you mean by these extraordinary remarks?"

Varney, whose brain seemed to have changed into a ball of shooting pains and brilliant fireworks, endeavored to think out clearly just what he had meant by his extraordinary remarks.

"Possibly you think that I resemble you somewhat?" he said, slowly. "A number of people here seem to hold that view. In fact, they have mistaken me for you — everybody has. Doubtless you know why they

should feel unkindly towards you. I make myself perfectly clear, do I not? Only this afternoon I heard that a little party was being gotten together for my benefit."

The author dropped his nervous-looking eyes; he tugged uncertainly at his wisp of a mustache.

"This thump on the head from poor old Orrick may satisfy them," continued Varney. "But my idea is that it won't. I think Orrick was acting independently this afternoon. A kind of free lance, you know. I think he met me by accident. There 's a train to New York at eight-ten," he added, looking about for his hat. "I believe I 'd clear out if I were you."

"Something 's back of this!" broke out Stanhope suddenly. "Some dirty scheme — some infamous plot —"

"Yes, you are right," said Varney with an effort. "There is a plot back of it. But I don't know that that makes it any better for you —"

"I insist that you explain yourself at once!"

"I was just about to. I came here three days ago, a stranger — on a little stay. A friend who is with me got interested in a reform movement here. Politics, you understand. The other side to injure him, published the story that I was you, under an *alias*. Naturally we did n't like that. We bought the paper just to say that I was n't. I supposed that had settled it. It seems I was wrong. You see, a good deal of feeling had been worked up meantime —"

"Hello!" exclaimed Stanhope suddenly raising his hand. "What 's that?"

Varney listened. "Men's voices," he said slowly.

The door flew open and a man whose ordinary impassivity was touched with a pleasurable excitement stood on the threshold.

"If you please, sir, there 's some rough-looking men just sneaked up on the lawn. Ten or twelve — sort of a mob-like, Hi should say —"

"What do they want?" demanded Stanhope in a high voice.

"No good, sir, I 'm thinking," said the servant shaking his head. "I was at an upstairs window and saw 'em come sneaking up one by one, hentering at different places. I made a noise not honlike the click of a 'ammer of a gun, and they took alarm and scattered back. But they hain't gone away, sir. Not by a long shot they hain't."

Henry's master leaned against his handsome writing table, his face white as a sheet. It appeared to be a moment when quick action was rather important.

"They 'll try the bell first," said Varney. "Lock all the doors and windows downstairs, my man. Quick! When they ring, open a window upstairs, and ask what they want."

Henry recognized the note of competent authority. He assumed, anyway, that it was the strange gentleman's quarrel they had so fortunately been let into, and it was only fair that he should manage it. "Very good, sir," he said and flew.

"But I 'm afraid," added Varney to Stanhope, "there is no doubt what they want."

A single quiet footfall sounded on the porch and the

door-bell pealed. In the silence that followed, the noise of the turning of locks and the drawing of bolts was distinctly audible in the study.

"Damn you!" cried Stanhope, pale with the sudden white-hot passion of the unstable. "This is your doing — you — you masquerader!"

The two men stood facing each other, hardly a yard apart. They were almost exactly of a figure, Stanhope being if anything a shade the taller. Each was conscious as he regarded the other that he might be looking at himself, intangibly altered, in a mirror; and the fancy was pleasing to neither.

"I suppose I might as reasonably call you that," said Varney quietly. "I might as reasonably say that this knock on the head from Sam Orrick was your doing. The fact is that you were a fool to come back here. But as for those poor fellows out there —"

The door-bell rang again, insistently, and he broke off. A window upstairs rattled open, and they heard a man's steady voice:

"'I there on the piazza! What do you want?"

"I want to see Mr. Stanhope a minute," called a thicker voice from below. "On important business."

"'E's not 'ere," said faithful Henry. "'E's expected to arrive to-morrow."

"You're a — — liar!"

Immediately a general yelling arose, from farther back in the darkness. Diplomacy, it seemed, was about to be abandoned for immediate action. But over the sudden hubbub, that cool voice at the window rang out again:

"Hif it's fight you want, Hi'll say we were expectin' you. There's ten of us 'ere, hall armed —"

A derisive voice was heard in answer. "We'll see about that, my buck, pretty — — soon — "

"Men! Hi've got a brace of six-shooters 'ere in my 'and. The first of you as comes into the light gets a couple of 'oles drilled into 'is hinside, neat and clean."

Having launched this threat from his inky window to gain a little time, Henry silently withdrew, flung downstairs and broke into the study, his scrape and bow forgotten, to inquire whether either of the gentlemen had, in Gawd's mercy, hanythink that would shoot.

His master, whose well-kept hands were opening and shutting by his side, did not answer.

"No," said Varney, "I am unarmed."

"Heven without a gun, sir," said Henry to Stanhope, and his look was not such as a servant wears to his master, "we could lick a harmy of them chaps."

"We could never do it!" cried Mr. Stanhope shrilly.

The shouting outside, though still a discreet distance back, grew more articulate. Very fearful were their menaces.

"Come out, Stanhope! Your time's come!"

"We'll string yer to a tree, yer — — "

"Fellers, let's burn the damn rat out!"

Stanhope's face went from white to pale green. He steadied himself against the table with a hand that quivered, and looked at Varney.

"It's — it's you they want," he said.

"O my Gawd," cried Henry and put his face into his hands.

"Yes," said Varney, averting his eyes also, "it 's I they want." And he started for the door.

But Henry, who had noted the marked resemblance between the two men and had caught faint glimmerings of what these strange things meant, barred his way with an immortal rejoinder.

"Hif you please, sir, Stanhope was the name they called."

Varney gave a tired laugh. His terrible headache made him chafe at any prolonging of the scene. Moreover, it made rational thought difficult, twisting common-sense into fanciful shapes. It seemed to him an unendurable thing that he should protect himself under the wing of such a man as Stanhope; and the thought of fierce action drew him like a lodestone.

"You 're a good fellow, Henry," he said quietly. "However, your master and I agree perfectly."

But at that moment, the small window at the back of the room, which no one had thought to fasten, flew open and a man slipped nimbly through it — a big, hard-breathing, iron-faced man, with perspiration streaming rivers down his sun-tanned cheeks.

Mr. Stanhope, with a weak exclamation, moved so as to bring the table between himself and the intruder. Varney's eyes grew suddenly anxious.

"Thank God, you 're safe, Larry!" gasped Peter, looking hurriedly about him, and characteristically asking no questions. "Four of us! Magnificent! We can hold this room for a year against those drunken sheep. . . ."

The din outside grew deafening. One man, brav-

ing Henry's threat, had made a bolt across the star-lit space to the house, and no shot had rung out from the upstairs window. Others had instantly followed, and the little front porch now echoed under many feet. Yet, boisterous as they were, the mobbers seemed to hesitate at taking the front door at a rush, as though fearful of what reception might await them in the dark and silent hall beyond.

But now a stone crashed through a front window downstairs, and a man's voice rang out suddenly so close that it seemed to be inside the parlor:

"One minute to come out fair in the open, Stanhope, or we 'll set a light to this house, so help us God!"

Mr. Stanhope gave a low cry. "Call to them, Henry!" he ordered, wildly. "Quick! Tell them I 'm coming out this minute."

Henry, his back against the door, did not stir.

"*Hare* you goin' out, sir?"

"No," said Varney, "he is n't. But I am."

Peter came further into the pretty room, impatient eyes fixed on Varney. "What fool's talk is this?" he demanded roughly. "Nobody is going out. We four —"

Another loud crash of broken glass drowned him out. In Varney's eye the look of anxiety had deepened. He understood everything at a glance. Adroit proddings of a few poor Hackleys, some cheap liquor, the word passed to Maginnis as from a friend — this was how the boss of Hunston had plotted to set his heel upon Reform and stamp it out forever. He came three steps back into the room, sternly.

"You were a monumental fool to let them send you here, Peter —"

But the swelling tumult without made parley out of the question.

"No time for talk!" roared Peter. "It's fight now — before they are in on us! Lights out — and to the front, all of us!"

"Right hoh!" cried Henry, man to man, and ran out the door.

"No, no!" protested Mr. Stanhope thickly, "it is n't fair —"

Peter wheeled and looked at him, personally, for the first time. He had recognized him instantly, and now when he saw what he saw on that sickly green face, his fine eyes hardened.

"Four, I said? I see there are only three men here. No matter — three good ones are more than enough. Larry, stay here! I 'll take the front door — the man the front windows —"

But Varney blocked his way to the door with a face more resolute than his own.

"Stand back, Peter. We 'll do nothing of the sort. Those are Ryan's men out there. They don't want Mr. Stanhope — you know that. I don't like this place anyhow — I 'm going to get out —"

"I 'll sizzle in hell if you do!" bellowed Peter, and violently pinioned his arms.

But Stanhope, clutching at the chance, struck again for the safety of his skin. "He ought to go," he cried swiftly. "It is n't my quarrel — don't you see? Let go his arm there — you bully! — let him go!"

The shock of that, curiously, surprised Peter into complying. He dropped Varney's arms, turned swiftly to the author and fixed him with a look for which, alone, another man would have cried for his blood. "Did I hear you aright?" he said in an oddly still voice. "Do I understand you to suggest that he be sent out there alone?"

Mr. Stanhope shrank before that look, but this was the utmost concession to it.

"It 's not my quarrel," he said moistening his lips — and suddenly, glancing over Peter's shoulder, his eyes lit with a frightened gleam of triumph. "It 's he they — "

Over the shouting a single hoarse cry rang out very close at hand.

"Curse you for the cowardliest dog God ever made!" cried Peter, his passion breaking its thin veil of calmness like a bullet. "If you interfere in this, you 'll not hide afterward where I 'll not find you. Larry! You 'll — " Peter turned and broke off short with an exclamation which was a good deal like a groan.

Varney was not there. Taking advantage of Peter's momentary distraction, he had slipped through the door and fled down the hall.

Shaken with the rushing sense of his friend's danger, Peter started wildly for the door. But in that fraction of a second, the lamp on the center table was blown suddenly out and he found himself in inky darkness. At the same moment something thrust itself dexterously between his moving legs and he fell heavily to

the floor. Falling he struck out blindly, and his whirling fist collided with something warm and soft. The next instant he was up and groping madly for the door, his sense of direction all gone from him. But the author lay where he had fallen, quite still, and, for the moment, afraid no longer.

The moment's gain, however, was all that Stanhope needed, though it was no more. In the dark hall where a single candle burned, Varney had met Henry. The instant before, a man's head and shoulders had protruded suddenly through the broken-in parlor window, and Henry, waiting patiently in the shadow of the wall had flatted him to the floor with a heavy chair, which broke in his hands. Then he heard swift footsteps in the hall, and divining what had happened, bounded out.

"Stand clear, man!" cried Varney loudly. "I 'm going out."

A prolonged shouting indicated that the promise was heard with approval outside. But not so with Henry, who closed in on him fiercely, crying: "Not hon your bloomin' life, you don't — harskin' your pardon, sir!"

Varney, however, was a thing of nerves and passion now, all energy and muscle and concentrated purpose. He shook the man off like a rat, and the next moment burst open the front door.

All this had happened far more quickly than it can be set down. Five minutes had hardly passed since Henry's first challenge had rung from the upstairs window. This would have been ample time to carry the house by storm, front and back, had the invaders

had the leadership and wit; but these things they lacked. They were still massed on the front porch, pell-mell, in a turbulent group, ramping, raging, thirsty for action, but as yet ineffective; though one of them had at that moment set a match to a torch of newspapers and kindling wood. Delay had loosed the hunter's instinct in the half-drunken band: it broke into flame at sight of the quarry. Varney had scarcely shown himself in the half-opened door when some one struck him a savage blow on the chin that sent him reeling backwards.

He had come out to them with no plan, no sense of hostility, and only because, in his disturbed mood, he despised Stanhope so utterly that he would take no protection from him, or give him any share in his own troubles. But at that blow, a demon sprang to life in him which knew no law but an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. His left arm shot out like a piston at the dim flushed face before him, and the face bobbed downward out of sight.

At the same moment, the heavy back of a chair in supple hands descended out of space behind him with a thud; and a great tall fellow, staggering backward with the unexpected pain of that stroke, for the moment obstructed his comrades. For Henry had followed where he could not lead, and now ranged himself joyously at Varney's side in the narrow threshold.

The setback, however, was trivial. In the next breath, they closed round him with a great shout, thrusting Henry violently to one side. Three men were required for this latter task, who so missed the real

sport of the night. Another was caught when the front porch fell in with a crash, and was pulled out with a broken leg an hour later. But enough remained. Varney was instantly lost in a struggling and kicking hurly-burly of arms and legs, and was borne with them in a rush down the short flight of steps to the lawn. All, of course, could not reach him. So it happened that two or three, on the outskirts of the tossing group, heard the feet of reinforcements in the hallway and wheeled at that sound. Even in the faint light, Peter's great size made him easily recognizable; and a young man of Hare's party named Bud Spinks, who admired him intensely and had partaken of his hospitality in the town, was still enough himself to cry out:

"Keep away, Mr. Maginnis! This ain't your fuss!"

"You 'll see!" shouted Peter, and cleared the wrecked porch at a bound.

In his dash through the darkness for the door he had stumbled over the fragments of Henry's broken chair. One stout leg of it remained in his hand now. Peter's prowess with that weapon has passed into legend in Hunston. They tell to this day of a great giant, eight feet tall, watchful eyes in all parts of him, impervious to all blows, hundred-handed and every hand like the kick of a mule, who met ten men almost single-handed that night and routed them utterly.

He was the biggest man in Hunston, the strongest and the most terrible in anger. Bud Spinks, because he did not know whose fuss that was, felt the bite of that anger, and toppled beneath it like a sapling under the woodman's axe. So did poor old Orrick, who had

met the others on the road and returned with them, and who was the only man of them all that Peter recognized. Two of those who were looking after Henry, having laid him to rest by this time, rushed Peter from behind. One of them struck him heavily on the point of the jaw as he swung around, and was astonished that he did not appear to notice it. The next instant he fell senseless under a blow that crushed through his upraised fists as a hammer might go through a drumhead. One Peter hit a glancing blow upon the shoulder, and as long as he lived he could never raise that arm above his head again.

Thus Peter was free to fling himself on that violently swaying mass which he knew held Varney. Even those on the further side knew precisely the moment he struck it. The whole body quivered with the shock of that impact. Those nearer that chair leg and that equally terrible fist had more personal testimony to his presence. There was no resisting either. They got in many blows upon him, as his bruised body and discolored face showed next morning. But he never once faltered. To himself, with a precious moment lost back in the study and a heart afire to know if he were yet in time, his progress seemed desperately slow; yet he cleft a path for himself as by magic.

Knocking some down, thrusting others aside or frightening them away, he found his answer at last with sudden directness. A big raw-boned fellow, fiercely drunk and working with his feet at something on the ground, wheeled and struck passionately at Peter's face. A blow like a cannon shot was his reply,

and, for the second time under the impact of that fist, Jim Hackley (though Peter did not know him) measured his length upon the ground. Two or three scattering ones, still up, were hovering in Peter's rear with a discreetness which, it chanced was now quite superfluous. For at that instant, he caught sight of his friend, and immediately all the fight went out of him and his knees shook.

Varney lay anyhow on the trodden grass, dappled with blood, his head curved fantastically beneath his shoulders. Another had gone down with him and lay half over him, a long arm locked about him in a curious gesture that oddly suggested protection. This one lay face downward, but Varney, as it happened, was on his back, and his upturned face looked in the dusky night the image of death.

Peter dropped his club with a strangled cry, and went down on his hands and knees. No reassuring flutter met the hand which he thrust inside the trampled bosom. That heart seemed stilled. He gathered the limp form in his arms like a child's and turned a dreadful face upon the beaten fragments of the mobbing-party.

"By God!" he shouted passionately. "You 've killed him!"

They faded away into the darkness, such of them as could walk, sobered by the horror of that cry, frightened more at that face than at all the blows which had gone before.

So Peter stood alone in the little lawn, dark figures of his enemies stretched here and there about him, his

great arms clutching the inert body of his friend, groaning his pain to the four winds. But the next instant, flying hoof-beats sounded on the road, raced near, and a two-horse buggy, overloaded with men, pulled up sharply at the gate. A very small pale man, in a frock-coat plastered with dirt, and stuttering violently as he shouted Peter's name, tore up the path.

"You 're too late, Hare!" cried Peter wildly. "They 've killed him!"

CHAPTER XXII

RELATING HOW VARNEY FAILS TO DIE; AND WHY SMITH REMAINED IN HUNSTON; AND HOW A RECEPTION IS PLANNED FOR MR. HIGGINSON

Thus it happened that the southbound local, which went through at eight-ten, did not acquire Varney as a passenger that night; and his old friend, Elbert Carstairs, did not meet his emissary at nine-thirty, or indeed at any hour that evening. But two travelers for New York did board the local at Hunston, and both of them, as it chanced, repaired to the car provided for smokers, each for his own reasons.

One of them straightway lighted a long cigar, which a gentleman had given him that morning, doubtless unwisely, for he was not above twelve years old. The other, who happened to sit in the seat just before him, did not smoke. He was rendered conspicuous by the fact that he wore no hat, and by the deadly pallor of his face, relieved only by a reddening bump beneath the right eye. His clothes also were dirty and disheveled till he seemed scarcely the superior in elegance of the little ragamuffin behind him.

So that it was not surprising that the amiable conductor, standing by for the tickets and struck by the obvious likeness, should have observed:

"Your son 's pretty young to be a-smokin' seegars, ain't he?"

Mr. Stanhope, not knowing what this remark meant, and caring less, answered with a cold stare, though inwardly he cursed the man for his fatuous impertinence. That done, he relapsed dully into his own thoughts, which were all of the house he had scurried from, terrified by Peter's cry, half an hour before. . . .

In that house, in Mr. Stanhope's own deserted bed, Varney lay at his ease, as quiet as a statued man. Over the bed, industriously at work, hung the keen-faced town doctor, whom Hare had gotten with a speed which passed all understanding. At the foot of the bed stood Peter Maginnis, his face like the face of a carven image.

At the very moment when the garrulous conductor was trying to foist off poor little Tommy Orrick upon Mr. Stanhope, the old doctor raised his head.

"He 's not dead *yet*. An excellent chance I should say."

Peter's face did not change. His hand tightened on the foot-board till his nails whitened. It was as though he had pulled a signal cord which ran unseen under the bed-clothes and rung a mysterious bell in some remote corner of his friend's head. Varney immediately opened one eye, let it rest on Peter and said in a clear voice:

"You all right, Peter?"

That done he relapsed immediately into unconsciousness again. The doctor took out a large handkerchief, wiped his brow and smiled. Peter, his quick relief like

a storm of joy, went downstairs to tell his friends of the Reform Committee, and do a thousand other things.

By nine o'clock the town was ringing with the wild story, and in the still watches of the later night the telegraph flung it to far places, to be read in wonder next morning in a million homes. Overnight, the great eye of the country turned like an unwinking searchlight upon the dingy town by the Hudson where happened to dwell Mrs. Elbert Carstairs and her only daughter, Mary. And all the world read how two men who were doubles had strangely met in a lonely house with a drunken mob outside; how one of them, who had earned the mob, turned the other out to face it; how the son of a famous captain of industry had shamed the Berserkers in his passionate muscularity: how one "double" had fled to save his skin and how the other, battered almost beyond recognition, now lay trembling between life and death.

In Hunston, there followed next day a whirl of police activity, of which the net results were tame in the extreme. Of all the fierce band which had stormed the house of Mr. Stanhope, only poor old Orrick and Mr. British, the bookseller — he who had been pulled out senseless from under the beams of the porch — were identified. Mr. British flatly and resolutely declined to testify as to who his comrades were, and old Sam Orrick, terrified though he was by prospective horrors of the law, loyally perjured his immortal soul by swearing that the men were all strangers to him and that he believed them to be visitors from another city.

The count against these two proved to be only assault and battery, though for three days and nights it was a toss of the coin whether they would not have to answer for a graver charge. Peter's joy had soon proved premature and the doctor's smile faded in unexpected bewilderment. The sick man did not improve in the least. Delirium followed hard upon deadly stupor and there seemed no rousing him from either.

The yellow cottage with the trampled flower-beds and smashed windows, which looked so bare-faced with its front porch shaved away, had passed to Peter for the moment by right of conquest. In it everything that conducted to the comfort of ill man had been quickly and lavishly installed. Everybody was wonderfully kind and thoughtful. Mrs. Marne, who reached the cottage with Mrs. Carstairs half an hour after the doctor the first night, and had done wonders before the nurses arrived, was simply invaluable. Hare came night and morning, horribly formal and ill at ease, begging for something to do. Flowers and inquiries from total strangers were an hourly occurrence. From Charlie Hammerton came a quart of magnificent Scotch, followed on the second day by a pile of clippings from the *Gazette's* exchanges which must have gratified the injured man extremely if only he had been able to read them. His own leading article, headed "Laurence Varney, Hero," Editor Hammerton modestly suppressed. By the hand of sad-faced McTosh came a hideous floral piece, in fact, a red, white, and blue star, bearing the label "From the sor-

rowing crew of the *Cypriani.*" Mrs. Carstairs, whose emotions at the time were hardly fully understood in the yellow cottage, called daily and sent beautiful roses and chicken jelly. The roses faded and the chicken jelly was considerably enjoyed by the nurses. But from Mrs. Carstairs's daughter, whose filial relations had invoked all these things, there came neither flower nor word.

The fight had taken place upon a Thursday night. On Friday, the Hunston doctor, at his wits' end, had asked for a consultation. On Saturday, the great doctor from the city had spent an hour in the sick-room, first examining the patient in a bodily way, and then prodding him with a tireless stream of questions, however futile — anything to make him talk. At the end of that time he had whispered awhile with the town doctor and drawn Peter into the study downstairs.

"What 's the matter with him, Mr. Maginnis?" he asked abruptly.

"Matter?" echoed Peter. "Was n't he beaten to a pulp?"

"Kicks don't kill a man with that kind of physique. What has he got on his mind?"

"I don't know," said Peter, miserably. "The last time I saw him —"

"Find out," said the great doctor, briefly. "If you don't, he may die. He seems to have had a shock of some kind. You must work upon that line. There is nothing the matter with his body that he can't throw off. But he will not get well unless you put the idea into his head that he *must.*"

And glancing at his watch, he bowed stiffly, and was whirled away to the station.

Peter was utterly at a loss. He had no idea what had taken Varney up the road to Stanhope's that afternoon, much less of any shock that could conceivably have come to him. But he set himself to find out. By the next morning, partly through inquiry, partly through patching two and two together, he had worked out a theory. Guesswork, of course, was rather dangerous in a delicate matter such as this; but the doctor's report after breakfast had been the very worst yet. Peter never faltered. He picked up his hat from the study table, in front of which he had been figuring these things out, and started down the hall.

Mrs. Marne was sitting quietly on the bottom step of the stairway, her dark head in her hands; and Peter was glad to see her.

"I 've found out a little about that," said Peter, in a low voice. "I believe it was — to see Miss Carstairs that he came up the road that day."

"Yes," said Mrs. Marne. "I have heard that too."

"She struck me," said Peter, "as a nice little girl. Probably she does n't understand the situation. I am going to see her now."

"She won't see you," said Mrs. Marne.

"Yes, she will," said Peter quietly, and started for the door.

But Mrs. Marne caught him by the hand, protectingly, like an elder sister, and drew him into the parlor and shut the door.

Half an hour later Peter came out and went up

the stairs. At the landing he paused to take off his shoes, and went on up in his stocking feet.

It was Sunday morning, near eleven o'clock, a brilliant morning all sun and wind. The far church bells of Hunston were ringing on the clear air like chimes from another world. Never afterward could Peter hear the Sunday bells without thinking of that moment. At the door, he met Miss Nevin, the day-nurse, coming out. She said she was going to telephone the doctor.

Peter slipped into the darkened room and shut the door noiselessly behind him. After a moment, he tipped over to the bed and sat down in the nurse's chair, silently. The bed looked very fresh and white and unrumpled, and that was because the injured man had for two days lain almost wholly quiet. The thin coverlet defined his long frame perfectly. Many bandages about the limbs and trunk made it look grotesquely bumpy and misshapen. One arm, wrapped from shoulder to finger-tip was outside the coverlet; now and then the hand, which was muffled large as a boxing-glove, moved a little. Cloths ran slantwise about chin, brow, and head, leaving only breathing space and one eye uncovered.

Presently, as he became more used to the darkness, Peter observed that the eye was open and regarding him incuriously: and he started in some confusion. "Do you feel much pain now, old chap?" he began rather huskily.

"Pain?" repeated Varney, vaguely. "No, I don't feel any pain."

"No pain! That's fine!" said Peter with lying

cheerfulness, for he knew that this deadness to sensation was the worst feature in the case. "That — left leg is rather badly bruised, it seems. I was a little afraid *that* might be troubling you some."

Silence.

"Did Miss Nevin show you all your flowers? They 've just been pouring in all day every day. We could turn florists to-day without spending a penny for stock. Could n't we, Larry, eh?"

"Yes," said Varney laboriously. "We could."

"Everybody has been so kind," continued Peter, desperately, "that upon my word it 's hard to pick and choose. If I were asked to say who had really been kindest — let me see — yes, I 'd name — Mrs. Carstairs. Flowers and something to eat, some little dainty or delicacy, twice a day. The fact is, old chap, to put it plainly, though I don't want to distress you, you know — she is blaming herself about this. Blaming herself greatly."

"She ought n't to do that," said Varney after a time.

"Of course she ought n't to. Yet it 's natural enough in a way. Of course, I 'm blaming myself, too — like the mischief — I 'd had so many warnings, you know. Little Hare is blaming himself. And Mr. Carstairs — poor old fellow! I 'll show you his letters when — the light 's a little better for reading. They 're fine, honestly. Of course, he wanted to come on right away, but I would n't let him."

Silence again.

"So you see how many of us," continued Peter,

nearing his awkward climax, " have been worried, *personally,* about this — trouble. And how much, well — how much — happiness is bound up in your getting well. And by the way — I declare I nearly forgot Miss Carstairs — I declare! "

There was a long silence, which Peter resolved not to break. Through the shuttered window, the distant bells chimed faintly into the room. The sick man's stray arm moved restlessly on the coverlet, but otherwise he lay quite still.

At length Varney said: " When did you see Miss Carstairs? She has n't — been here — ? "

But poor Peter's errand was not so easy as that. He had no glad shaft of promise with which to pierce that deadly Nessus-coat of apathy.

" She could n't come here, old chap," said Peter, very gravely. " You had n't heard, of course. Miss Carstairs is very ill."

" Miss Carstairs is very ill," repeated Varney, not inquiringly, but like a child saying over a lesson.

" Awfully ill," said Peter encouragingly. " It seems that she came home Thursday night a little after seven, looking very pale and badly, but insisting that there was nothing the matter. She sat upstairs with her mother until about eight, when somebody called her down to the telephone. Well, she did n't come back. So after a while Mrs. Carstairs sent down to find out why. The maid found her in the hall — in fact, on the floor, I believe. She had fainted, you know. Yes — that was it. Fainted dead away — poor little girl."

After what seemed an eternity of waiting, Varney

asked: "What was it — do you know? At the telephone?"

"Yes. It was Mrs. Marne. She called up Miss Carstairs in the first excitement of — of your accident, it seems, and I 'm afraid she gave a very exaggerated and alarming account, you know. They put her to bed," continued Peter clearing his throat, "and there she 's been ever since. The great shock, you know. Mrs. Marne saw her this morning — the first time she had been admitted. It 's all quite sad. Quite sad. We 'll talk of it again when — you 're feeling a bit stronger."

Varney, who had lain like a statue for two days and nights, had begun moving a little under the coverlet, stirring first one swathed leg, then the other, as though seeking vainly to shift his position. Now he said at once: "I want to hear now."

Peter gave a deep sigh. He thought, and rightly, that this was the best thing that had happened yet.

"Well, it 's all very strange, Larry. When I said that it was the shock of the accident that had made her ill, I did not tell the whole truth. It seems that she is suffering from a terrible hallucination about it. She feels in some strange way that the responsibility for all this — is hers. She told Mrs. Marne that she was responsible for your being on the road that night, and that she had been unfair about something or other, and that but for that the — trouble would never have happened. I don't pretend to understand it. But feeling as she does now — if anything were to — to go wrong, the poor child would count herself — she would count herself — "

"Don't!" said Varney very clearly and distinctly.

His face looked all at once so ghastly that Peter's heart stopped beating. He thought in a horrible flash that the end had come, and that he, Peter Maginnis, had brought it by tearing at the worst wound his friend had. His clumsy diplomacy fell from him as at the last trump. He dropped on his knees beside the bed with a groan.

"For God's sake, Larry, don't leave *that* mark to a child like her. Don't give us all *that* sorrow to carry to our graves —"

But Varney had pulled his arms free and was clutching wildly at his head-bandages with heavily swathed fingers.

"You need n't worry about me," he said in a sharp anguished voice. "Great Scott! What 's — what 's wrong with my *head!* It 's killing me."

He recovered with a speed which puzzled the old Hunston doctor even more than his previous lethargy had done. Five days later he was well enough to be lifted downstairs to the small back piazza, and here he lay blanketed up in a reclining chair for half the sunny afternoon.

A bundle of letters and telegrams lay on his covered knees; and going slowly through them, he came presently to one from Elbert Carstairs, arrived only that morning:

"My Dear Boy:

Words are feeble things at their best, and I know of none that would convey to you my great

joy at the news that you are out of danger. By the same mail, I have learned that my other dear sick one in Hunston is quite herself again, and I say to God in gratitude upon my knees that my cup is full."

A pause in the reading here. The long hand of the nurse's clock on the window-sill had crawled half around the dial before Varney raised the letter again from his blanketed lap:

"There is much in my heart to tell you, much to beg your forgiveness for, but I shall keep it to say to you face to face. Just now the keenest point in my grief is that all this suffering I have brought upon you has been worse than unnecessary. Light has come to me in these sleepness nights, and I see now that there was a much better way to seek what I sought, a far happier path."

The letter slipped down upon the swathed knees again, and he lay staring at the blown and sunny treetops. Presently the door at his side opened; a man started to come through it, stopped short, and stood motionless on the threshold.

Varney slowly turned his head. In the doorway, to his dim surprise, stood Mr. Stanhope's man, Henry, bowing, unobtrusive, apologetic, ready to efface himself at a gesture like the well-trained servant he was.

"Why — is that you, Henry?"

"Harskin' your pardon for the hintrusion, sir," said Henry with a wooden face. "I did n't know you were 'ere, sir. 'Opin' you are feeling improved to-day, sir — if you please, Hi 'll withdraw —"

"Henry," said Varney, "that is no way for you to

speak to me — after the way you stood up for me that night. Come here."

And he disentangled from his covers and held out a rather maimed-looking hand.

Then he saw the soul of the man whip through the livery of the menial like a knife, and Henry, stumbling forward with a working face, clasped that hand proudly in his strong white one: only he dropped on one knee to do it, as if to show that, though gentlemen might be pleased to show him kindness now and then, he perfectly understood that he was not as they.

"Ho, sir," he broke out in a tone very different from his well-controlled voice of service, "I never seen a pluckier thing done, nor a gamer fight put up. You make me too proud, sir, with your 'and — man to man . . . I was shamed, sir, till I could n't bear it when I came to and learned that I 'ad not stayed with you, sir, to the end. Three of them closed in on me, sir, and harskin' your pardon, sir, I was whippin' hof 'em to standstill when one of them tripped me from be'ind, sir,— "

"Stand up, Henry," said Varney, rather agitated, "like the man you are."

Henry stood up, with a jerky "Thank you, sir," striving with momentary ill-success to get a lackey's mask back upon that quivering face.

"I 'll always remember you," said Varney with some difficulty, "as a good and brave man. I don't think I 'll ever forget how you disobeyed an order — to try to save me. And now tell me — what became of your master? "

"'E's in the village, sir," said Henry rather bothered by his throat. "I'm expecting 'im in any moment, sir —"

"In the village?" repeated Varney, surprised. "Mr. Stanhope is in Hunston?"

"*Mr. Stanhope!*" said Henry with an insufferable contemptuousness for which he at once apologized. "Harskin' your pardon, sir — I thought you inquired for my master. Mr. Stanhope, I 'ave 'eard, sir, has sailed for Europe."

"Well, who 's your master, then?"

"Mr. Maginnis is my master, sir."

Varney deliberated on this, and slowly smiled. "Well, you 've got a good one, Henry."

"Thank you, sir. That 's 'im now, sir. I 'ear 'is motor in the road. If you 'll excuse me, sir — I 'll go and let 'im in."

And he bowed and went away, only pausing in the entry to attend a moment to his blurred eyes with the back of a supple hand.

Peter stepped out into the porch with a cheery greeting and dropped into a rocking-chair, looking worn and tired. The instant his heavy anxiety over Varney was relieved, he had thrown himself back into the fight for reform with a desperate vigor which entirely eclipsed all his previous efforts.

"We-ell," he said in answer to Varney's question, "we 're humping along — just humping along. Time 's so confoundedly short, though. You know, Larry, this business the other night is proving the best card we 've got. Fact. I have n't tried to tell you

how worked up the people have been about your — accident, and how most of them don't stand for it for a minute. It 's pretty well understood around town that politics was back of it all in some way, though nobody can state a single fact, and I 've scoured the town for evidence without finding a scrap. Anyway, it 's the solemn fact, and the committee can prove it, that that feeling is bringing over a lot of votes that we never could have reached otherwise with a long distance 'phone."

"Praise be that they 're coming over, anyhow."

"This fight," continued Peter, absorbedly, "is confoundedly interesting because it is typical of what 's going on all over the country. Hunston is just a dingy little microcosm of the whole United States of America. You can't blame these poor beggars here much, afraid of their jobs as they are. It takes courage to make a break for virtue when the devil 's holding you by your bread and meat. But — well, I 'd hate like the mischief to lose, particularly since we 've managed to come in for such a beautiful lot of limelight. You know this fight is being watched all over the country, since that trouble? And hang it, it does make a difference when the Associated Press carries half a column about you every night. Do you remember that first night in Hunston, Larry," he continued, "when you said that our part in the town's affairs must be that of quiet onlookers only? Quiet onlookers! And now everybody in the country is playing quiet onlookers on us. Our names are household words in California, and I 'm credibly informed that they 're naming babies

after you all through the middle West. Funny, is n't it?"

Varney assented with a laugh. Presently he said rather constrainedly: "Peter — I want you to tell me a little about that night. Who was caught?"

Peter named the two. "They would n't testify," he explained, "and I could n't. Old Orrick was the only man I spotted. He will get punished for assault. I don't see that they 've got a case against British. He was knocked out when the porch fell, and he had n't done a thing then, except yell probably. You can't hang a man for yelling in this State."

"No. Did you — you — was anybody killed?"

"Bless your heart, no!" cried Peter. "Why, it was only a little old kicking-match and hair-pulling, you know, hardly worse than a college rush."

Varney looked suddenly and strangely relieved.

"I 'm mighty glad to hear that," he said, and presently added: "Have you seen — Smith?"

"Smith! He went to New York some days ago. I remember — it was the very day you pulled up and got well. Why, what about him?"

"Did n't you know? He was there that night," said Varney. "Right in the thick of it, helping me."

"Helping *you!* Smith!"

Varney nodded. "The minute they closed in on me," he said after a moment, "and we all bunched together, I felt that there was somebody in there fighting on my side. Pretty soon I heard a voice in my ear, it said: '*Keep on your pins as long as you can: these dogs 'll trample you if they get you down.*' I said,

'Is that you, Smith?' and he laughed and said, '*Still on my studies.*' Then somebody hit me over the head with something, and I went down and he went with me. He had one arm around me, I remember. I 've been thinking, ever since I could think at all, that they might —might have finished him. I believe he saved my life, Smith did."

"Well — bully for him!" said Peter slowly, much impressed. "What on earth struck him to do that, do you suppose? Well, well! I 'll certainly look that old boy up in New York and shake him by the hand."

There was a considerable silence. At just the moment when Varney was about to put another question, Peter opened his mouth and answered it.

"However," he said, an irrepressible note of irritation creeping into his honest voice, "even that was not the strangest thing that happened that night. Not by a long shot."

Varney's gaze fixed with sudden interest. "Higginson? You don't mean to say that he turned up?"

"I do. And got away with it again — confound his soul!"

"What happened? Any more dirty work? Did anything get into the papers?"

"No — oh, no! You 've got that sized up wrong, Larry. He 's no yellow journalist or anything like that. He 's only the slickest underground worker this town ever saw — with his confounded apologetic, worried-looking mask of a face. As for more dirty work — well, I guess the bloodshed the other night scared him up so — "

"But go on and tell me! Where 'd you see him? What did you say and —"

"Sitting in our front parlor, if you please, like a dear old friend of the family."

The remembrance of the way he had been affronted and outwitted chafed Peter's spirit uncontrollably. He rose and began pacing up and down the little porch, hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

"About an hour after we put you to bed," he exploded, "I slipped downstairs to tell Hare to keep everybody off the place. However, a lot of people had already come in. I glanced in at the parlor and it seemed full of them — Mrs. Carstairs and Mrs. Marne — they were the first to get here after Hare's delegation — Hammerton and another man from the *Gazette*, the committeemen, and several I 'd never laid eyes on before. Well, there in a corner, looking like a hired mourner at a nigger funeral, sat that fellow Higginson. You could have knocked me flat with a pinfeather. I 'm as sure as I stand here that it was he who worked up that mob for Ryan, and the whole dirty scheme — and then coming around with his tongue in his cheek to inquire after the victim! Can you beat that gall?"

"Not easily. What happened?"

"They asked me how you were. I told 'em. Then I said before the room-full: 'I was very sorry to find you out this afternoon, Mr. Higginson, when I called at your hotel.' The fellow looked white as a sheet and mumbled something I could n't catch. Well — I could n't smash him there before all the women, so I said: 'Please don't go away this time

until I see you. I 'm most anxious to have a little private conversation with you.' Oh, of course that was a mistake — I hate to think about it! But — well, I was a good deal worried just then," he explained, rather sheepishly, " and fact is, for the minute I was n't thinking very much about Higginson. I need n't add that he had sneaked when I came down again. Had the cheek to leave behind a message with Hare saying he regretted to miss me, but felt it his duty to escort the ladies home."

Varney, though he had grounds for animosity which Peter never even guessed, laughed aloud. But it was a brief laugh, which quickly faded.

" And he 's never been seen or heard of from that day to this? Well, for my part," he went on, rather constrainedly, " I 'm almost ready to believe the man 's a myth — a mere personification of evil — an allegorical name for the powers of darkness —"

" Myth!" cried Peter. " You 'll see! Why, he 's certain to turn up again, Larry — absolutely certain. You could n't keep him away with a flock of cannon. If he does n't come before, it 's dead sure that he 'll appear among us again on election day — four days from now — just to see the results of his pretty work. And when he does — "

" Well?" said Varney, amused through his own heartsoreness by Peter's vehemence. " When he does?"

" I 've got two men watching every train, day and night," said Peter. " When Higginson sets foot in this town again, one man trails him, and the other runs

for me. . . . Well, I 'm a generous and forbearing man, Larry, and I recall that you have n't had much fun here. I 'll — yes, hang it all! — I 'll bring the old rogue to you, dead or alive, and stand by in silence while you speak him your little piece."

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH VARNEY, AFTER ALL, REDEEMS HIS PROMISE

From the roaring ovation which followed Peter's brief remarks there emerged again the sudden, clean-cut silence. Mayor Hare — Mayor by the narrowest margin in the heaviest vote ever cast in that town — stood upon the improvised little stand and looked out over the packed square. He rested one small hand upon the gay-clothed rail, and many people saw that it quivered. The showy "demonstration" of Peter's planning, brilliantly launched the moment the count was announced — the imported brass-band, the triumphal procession with the bugles, the streamers and the flag-wrapped carriages, and now the rostrum ready set and waiting in the heart of the dense crowd — all had taken him completely by surprise. His face showed it; yet he was not thinking of that exactly. All at once the Mayor's mind had harked back to another moment, not so many days before, when he had stood in this square to make a speech; and at the rushing thought of the great contrast between that moment and this, there rose in him a sense of gratefulness so deep that it took palpable form, and stuck, suffocatingly, in his throat.

The square swam before his blinded eyes. He took off his glasses and wiped them frankly. Stiff formality left him, without a nod at parting, carrying along the "few remarks" he had nervously thrown together in his Roman progress up Main Street.

"The modesty of the man who has just addressed you," he began unsteadily, "will deceive no one. You all know what I owe to him — what our town owes to him. You all know that if I am almost too proud and too happy to speak at all just now, it is because a kindly chance sent Mr. Maginnis to Hunston."

Cheers, more cheers, and yet again cheers; cheers running on and on as though they never meant to stop; spontaneous waves of applause that meant, what nearly all knew, that Maginnis personally had captured Hunston, and that his efficiency with a chair-leg had reared him into a kind of demi-god among certain rough fellows of the baser sort.

The speaker was resuming, not yet through with his tributes. His eye flitting over the shouting crowd had fallen upon a face.

"I know that both honesty and logic were on the side which Mr. Maginnis, coming here a stranger, elected to support. But honesty does not always make a winning cause, nor does logic. What I may call sympathy is often better than both. The splendid help that we got from Mr. Maginnis received this supplement. Sympathy came to aid Reform. A brutal outrage sullied the name of our town — an outrage which, there is sad reason to believe, was born of politics. The victim of that outrage, and the hero of that terrible night, is

happily with us to-day. . . . I will not offend him with any words of praise. But may I not say in the market-place what is the truism of the committee-room . . . that when this gentleman did what he did, he brought to Reform the sympathy which . . . has made me Mayor of Hunston."

Every eye followed the direction of the speaker's glance and his grave bow; and by the chance of good position, it happened that nearly all could see. Upon a dingy porch, a few yards up the Main Street side of the square, stood a tall, young man leaning on a cane, a wide felt hat shading a rather badly marked face. And — there was no possibility of any mistake — it was Jim Hackley's porch that he stood upon, and — yes — it was Jim Hackley himself, a sober and genial Jim Hackley, who stood by his side, in intimate pose, and grinning somewhat sheepishly into the glare of fame which suddenly enveloped him.

What part Hackley had borne in the events to which the orator had referred was never officially known, but it may be said without exaggeration that there had been suspicions abroad against him. His present friendliness with the victim of those events, therefore, seemed the gauge and symbol of penitence and reconciliation.

It was the first time that Hunston had seen Varney since the night he was hurt, and the first time that most of Hunston had ever seen him. The story of his deeds and his sufferings, doubtless considerably embellished and known to every one, made him a figure of keen popular interest, and the cheers and hand-clappings now

were thunderous, compelling him to lift his hat again and again. Some even started a swift descent upon the Hackley residence with the evident intention of carrying the young man to the stand on their shoulders. But Hackley came down to his gate to meet them and buffeted them away, explaining loudly, like an old friend and generally acknowledged sponsor: "He ain't up to it to-day, boys! Stand back!"

"Go on with your speech," said Peter in a fierce undertone to Hare. "He 's going to faint."

"Let us give honor to whom honor is due," cried Hare, hastily, and so resumed his remarks.

Peter's melancholy prediction, though it spread quickly among the crowd after Varney left the porch, was quite unfounded. Varney had not the least idea of fainting. At Hare's tribute, which was as unexpected as he felt it to be totally undeserved, and the sudden rain of eyes upon him, an unaccountable dizziness had seized him, while he stood reluctantly bowing; he had thrust out his hand and caught hold of the post. This blackness passed as quickly as it had come. The next instant he felt as fit a man as ever; and to the tender requests of his host, Mr. Hackley, that he should withdraw into the house for a "leetle rest-up," he returned a laughing refusal. For this was his last appearance in Hunston, as well as his first in recent days, and very strongly did he desire to make it testify to his warm interest in the town's great day and the personal triumph of his friend, Peter Maginnis.

What removed Varney so abruptly from the Hackley porch and the public view was the sudden fulfil-

ment of quite another prediction of Peter's: the one about the return to Hunston of the gum-shod Mr. Higginson.

The news came without warning. At just the moment when the Mayor replunged into his interrupted oratory, Varney became aware that a low, anxious voice behind him was insistently calling his name. He turned, and saw the figure of a man standing in Hackley's entryway, just inside the door; he had evidently slipped in from the rear; and now, catching the young man's eye, he began mysteriously beckoning and making signs.

"Kin I speak to you a minute, Mr. Varney?" he called in the same dramatic whisper.

Varney, in some surprise, advanced to the doorway and stepped inside the entry after the stranger — a poorly dressed fellow with an unshaven chin and a collarless neck.

"Well? What do you want, my man? And how do you know my name?"

At that the man gave the air of exploding, though his voice remained only a whisper, at once apologetic and immensely reproachful.

"*Know* your *name,* sir! Why, *excuse* me for usin' it so free, but I guess there ain't nobody in Hunston don't know *you,* Mr. Varney! Why, Mr. Varney, my six-year-old kid c'd pick you right out o' that crowd out there, same as 't was her pa, what with seein' your picture in the papers an' all, an' I guess there ain't anything you 'd ever want in *Hunston* you could n't have just for the trouble o' namin' it."

The random assertion struck some of the blood from the young man's cheek, but he said good-humoredly: "Well, I 'm glad to hear it. But tell me who you are, and what I can do for you."

The man's face, which had grown rather loose and mobile, instantly became business-like and alert.

"I 'm 'Lije Stobo, Mr. Varney — Hackley 'll tell you. I was hired a week ago by Mr. Maginnis to watch trains for a certain party kind of expected to show up here." His voice, already very low, dropped several tones lower, as he hurriedly went on: "Well, Mr. Varney, the party come in on Number 14 just now. It ain't five minutes ago since he stepped down on the deepo platform — disguised in some pretty good glad rags, he was, but o' course we spotted him right off, and —"

"Higginson?"

The man nodded. "My partner was with me — Callery — and we shadows our party to the Palace Hotel where he takes Room 41 and sneaks upstairs. Callery 's sitting in the lobby now, and I runs out to take the tip to Mr. Maginnis — but Lord bless you, Mr. Varney —" He pointed out the open door in the direction of the little speaker's stand where Peter sat impregnably walled in on all sides by dense human masses. "It might be an hour before I could get to him through *that*. I was up against it, f'r he 'd sure kill me if I let our party give us the slip again, and then I heard 'em all cheerin' you, and thinks I, *there 's* my man, and — "

Varney interrupted gratefully but briskly.

"You did exactly right, Mr. Stobo. I have long been anxious to see Mr. — that is, this party. In fact," he added, putting on his hat with significant firmness, "it is because of some business that I have with this party that Mr. Maginnis asked you to look out for him."

Mr. Stobo's eyes ardently approved the young man's readiness for "trouble."

"Well, *sir* — that 's took a load off'n my mind, I tell you! I 'll just skip on — will I, Mr. Varney? — and try to get the tip to Mr. Maginnis, as my orders was. He was *that set* on interviewin' this here party — but Lor', he 'd give him to you, same 's himself. Only — are you *sure* you 're feelin' up to it to-day, Mr. Varney? If mebbe you 'd let me 'r Callery go along now, just in case, y' know — "

Varney gave an answer which Mr. Stobo found completely reassuring. At the same time, he rapidly produced his pocket-book and pulled out a bill of alluring complexion.

"I owe you a great deal for bringing me this information, Mr. Stobo — more than I can repay. But perhaps you would let me —"

He stopped suddenly, for the man had started backing off down the entryway, a dull unaccustomed color showing in his grimy face.

"You did n't mean it, Mr. Varney! Why, how 'd I look my missus in the face — let alone myself — and tell her I took money off'n *you* —"

He disappeared out of the back door, and Varney, feeling uncomfortable and disproportionately touched,

put his spurned bill back in his pocket. Hackley, now perceiving that his guest's visitor was gone, turned his back on the speechmaking and hurried forward solicitously.

"I could 'a' hit that Stobo sneakin' in a-botherin' and a-'noyin' you," he said in tones of great sympathy. "I know how it is, Mr. Varney. Bit of a inverlid myself, I am — no health and no constitootion whatsomever, sir. Feelin' a leetle stiddier now, are you? Better lie down on my parlor sofy a while and git rested up nice, had n't ye? — many 's the day I 've lazied there, Lord knows, tryin' f'r to coddle my strength back."

Varney regretfully declined the offer. In fact, he must be going at once, he said, as he had a rather important business engagement; and would Mr. Hackley kindly show him the quiet back-exit to the street and the outer world?

Hackley, a tireless host, re-urged the charms of his sofy and cool well-water for invalids; but his guest remained politely firm. So there, on the little rear veranda, the two men parted with mutual esteem: Varney expressing sincere thanks for all Mr. Hackley's courtesies; Hackley compassionate over Mr. Varney's impaired constitution, but boggling over what regrets might haply betray him into the grip of the law's long arm.

Varney traversed the clothes-hung backyard, came out into the dingy alley, and made rapidly for the cross-street, where a string of carriages showed that "the quality" of Hunston was not without interest

in the day's proceedings. He did not see the carriages; to himself he seemed suddenly to walk in a great and silent solitude. There was noise enough about him, in all conscience, for every sentence that fell from Hare's lips was punctuated by a salvo; but the tumult beat itself to stillness against the closed fastness of his mind.

Under his eye, half way down the block to which he drew near, rose the weatherworn flank of the Palace Hotel. Somewhere within the ugly pile was his mortal enemy Higginson, trapped to his reckoning at last. Within five minutes they two would stand face to face; and he had long since promised himself that Higginson would remember the meeting for as long as he lived. A moment ago, the thought had filled him with a strange exhilaration: the prospect of a final accounting with the intriguing fly-by-night who had wronged him past all forgiveness had set his blood to leaping. But, exactly because that wrong went so deep, his pleasurable excitement ebbed faster than it had mounted. The wound that he had had from Higginson was one that no vengeance would heal. And with the recurrence of this knowledge his battle-joy flickered and went out like a spent match, and the little alley was a war-list no longer but a stretch without end of dry and dusty years. . . .

"I was lookin' for yer, Mist' Varney," said a husky, abashed voice.

Varney stared down at the small apparition before him with momentary unrecognition.

"Why — Tommy! Heaven bless us! Where did you spring from, boy?"

Tommy's eyes fell in awe, but sure enough, he was sticking out his small flipper in salutation. In fact, he had shaken hands a number of times since that first memorable occasion, and, in his way, was gradually beginning to catch the spirit of the thing.

"Kem up on the two-forty-five. Wit' Hauser's band. Got a loan of t'ree bucks off a frien'."

"The mischief you did! Where do you find friends like that nowadays? But what on earth made you pop back here? To hear Hauser's play and see all the fireworks?"

Tommy examined his toe with affected interest and shook his head.

"What then? Don't you like it in New York?"

"Yasser. Noo York 's all right, it is." And reluctantly he added: "You be'n sick, ain't you? Thought I 'd come and see how you was makin' it. Come afore now, on'y I could n't get next to de price."

"Tommy," said Varney, snuggling the boy's left hand into his own right and resuming the promenade, "you 're a mighty good friend to me."

They emerged into the street where a double line of vehicles, some of them gay with bright hats and parasols, flanked the curb on either side, and Varney turned north, his back to the square, unconscious of the many curious glances that were flung at him as he passed.

"Tommy," said Varney, "I 'm bound for the hotel on business, but I 'm not going to pull you away from all the fun —"

"Wut, that? That ain't no fun, sir."

"Don't you suppose I know fun when I meet it in the road, you little rascal? You stay here till it's all over and then I want you to come down to the yacht, and we'll have some dinner. Then I'll put you up for the night and to-morrow morning we'll go to New York together, eh? How's that?"

But Tommy said: "Nawser. We can't go yet. Somebody sent me to bring you. We got a car'dge here —"

"A carriage?"

"A victori'," emphasized Tommy.

"A victoria! All this on three bucks, Tommy! Well, well! You are the spender, though."

"Here's *our* victori'!" said Tommy proudly.

They halted abruptly before an open carriage . . . a victoria, indeed: a handsome double victoria, all polished dark wood and blue upholstery and shining nickeled harness, and sleek bay horses. This he saw in the first flash, wondering by what miracle Tommy Orrick had secured control of so glorious an equipage. And then . . . there was the pretty edge of a furbelowed skirt upon the carriage-floor . . . a dainty patent-leather toe upon the foot-rest . . . an unrolling panorama of white-gloved hands, pale buff dress, great plumed hat, eyes not seen yet known to be blue to match the upholstery . . . an exquisite lady sitting in the victoria. And this lady had recognized his presence, first with a faint frightened "Oh!" and then with a movement of those great hat-plumes which was beyond all doubt or cavil a bow . . . a bow of proper and civil greeting.

For him that meeting was stunning in its entire unexpectedness. The landscape went off in protest, exploded in pyrotechnic marvels; the earth spun and cavorted; the solar system was disrupted and planets ran amuck with din unbelievable. But he was used to these cataclysms now, and out of the roar of breakage he heard a voice much like his own saying pleasantly:

"Tommy refers to this calmly as *his* carriage, Miss Carstairs. See what a week of New York has done for him. Where did he disappear to — did you notice? A great day it has been" — in the rising inflection of farewell — "has n't it?"

Came out of space in answer, like a fluttering bird from nowhere, a voice that had once seemed music in his ears:

"I sent him . . . to look for you. They said that you were . . . ill. Perhaps you would let us drive you to the river?"

"And make you miss the speech?" continued this easy and agreeable young man, whom Laurence Varney, a great distance off, stood dumbly and watched from the swirling void with a certain remote admiration. "Of course not. I was never better in my life and the walk will be pleasant on so nice an afternoon. But thank you very much."

Again his tone held the faint inflection of finality, of leave-taking. Came again the voice like tossed chimes out of space:

"Then . . . won't you stay and hear the end? It would please Mr. Hare. From this carriage . . . you can see and hear everything very well."

"Thank you," said the debonair spirit, rather carelessly — while Laurence Varney, off in another world, clutched at the invitation, fought for it, lied, thieved, prayed, lived and died for it — "I'm afraid I must go on now."

"There is something I wanted to say. And . . . a message."

A shuffling of the cosmos, a shrieking readjustment of the universe, and he found himself sitting on a blue upholstered seat staring at two great golden moons, which later on turned out to be, after all, mere burnished buttons upon a coachman's purple back.

So, not for the first time, the sudden meeting with a lady knocked from the young man's head all recollection of his enemy. And if their parting had taken place in the entire privacy of a country road, their re-meeting, certainly, was in the fullest view of the many. Only, luckily, nobody chanced to be looking, or within eavesdropping distance; and even the coachman presently removed himself to stand at his horses' restive heads. Tommy's carriage happened to be the last one in the line. Behind it the street was a desert. Before it was nothing but a packed army of backs.

"I did not know that you were here until Mr. Hare spoke. And they all began to look. . . ."

"Mr. Hackley especially invited me to share his porch . . ." and the other Varney, not the one who sat so stiff and mute, desperate eyes glued on the far horizon, but the easy, negligent Varney, gay dare-devil

that he was, actually achieved a pleasant laugh. "I must show you his note. It 's been a long time since I have had anything to please me so much."

He unfolded and held out into the blue empyrean a rather soiled bit of paper, which a small white-gloved hand descended from heaven like a dove and took. Then, presumably, this was duly read:

MR. VARNEY. dear sir: Announcment of Election will be made in the Squair this p. m. around 6 p. m. Would feel onered if you would come to my Poarch where everthink can be seen & heard & no crouding, Josle ect. Will call at your Yot with horse and Bugy around 5 p. m. this p. m. if agreble though you don't nead no eskort anywairs in Hunston, the Unfortunit mistaik having been diskovered. Noing your intrest in our Poltix will add that I voated for Mister Hair, first think this a. m. with sorro for the Past and hoapes for your Speady convlessense,

Resp.

J. HACKLEY.

S. P. — Should you come to my Poarch all would no as bygorns was bygorns.

"Was n't that kind of him?" he asked when the note had again come down into the ornamental lap, which was the upper line of his range of vision. "And thoughtful. But then everybody has been so wonderfully kind to me. I think I shall remember Hunston as altogether the kindest town I ever saw."

There was quite a silence after that.

"I am like Jim," came the voice beside him, troubled

chimes waving bravely, "in having wronged you by . . . an unfortunate mistake. You have forgiven him, have n't you . . . let bygones be bygones? Can you do as much . . . for me?"

"Don't," he begged with sudden hoarseness — and there the mannersome insouciant Varney waved an easy hand and blew himself away, like the rascally light o' heels he was — "I have to ask forgiveness of you — not give it," he said.

"You have much to forgive. That day in the road — I was angry. I was not just . . . not fair. I am mortified to remember . . . what I said to you."

His heart contracted for the trouble in her voice; his spirit made obeisance to the courage which carried her so perfectly through that pretty suit for pardon; but for himself —

"There is not one thing — believe me — that your goodness can reproach itself for — not one thing for you to be sorry for. If you have forgiven me now — for all that you had to forgive — I go away quite happy."

His first easy composure, which far outmatched her own, had unsteadied her. His wasted and scarred face, which she had been quite unprepared for, had shocked her inexpressibly. And now there was this new thought knocking at the door of her mind — that he was going away quite happy.

"There was something else I wanted to tell you . . . if you could wait a moment . . . some news."

He turned toward her with a movement of pleasant interest, meant to verify his recent gallant promise;

but he turned so quickly that his face had no time to come into the kindly conspiracy, and no triumph of hyperbole could have described its look as happy.

"Yes? Good news, I hope?"

"I won't . . . be cowardly and let you think that this was accidental . . . my seeing you . . . and telling you that I'm sorry. We — we were going to drive down to the yacht . . . after the speeches were over. I don't understand it all yet, but this afternoon a great thing happened. There came a letter from my father . . . and everything is all settled now. He . . . wants my mother . . . more than me, now. Why should n't I tell you? It is what I have longed for . . . prayed for every night . . . for twelve years. We are going to New York — to-morrow — to see my father."

His great gladness at that made him forget himself entirely, and for the first time he could look at her.

"Why, I can't *tell* you how glad I am! How tremendously happy that makes me!"

She sat back in her cushioned seat, still as a sculptured lady, hands clasped on her silken lap, eyes gone off down the street, though not for vision, to where Hare was thundering a splendid peroration. He had already become aware, without looking at her, that she was richly and beautifully dressed; but he was hardly prepared for the effect which such a setting would have upon her face. For all his conjuring of memory, he had forgotten that she looked quite like that. . . .

"Yes . . . it makes me happy, too. And my mother wants to ask you — no, I do — that is, both

of us want to ask you — if you won't allow us to go down . . . in the yacht?"

Misunderstanding, the senseless world started mad antics again; but Intelligence, which saw more clearly, reached out a long arm and jerked it firmly back on its feet.

"Allow you! It's exactly what I'd like most *immensely*. She's all ready for you — I'll have my things off her in no time — catch the eight-ten to-night and go straight to congratulate Uncle Elbert. How great to see him so happy! I'll run right down to the yacht this minute and attend to it."

"There is nothing to attend to . . . is there? You said she was all ready. Of course we could not let you — leave her. We could not go in the yacht . . . unless you will go with us."

But speech stuck in his throat like a bone gone wrong. She would get no help from him; that was evident. If suffering had wrought miracles of absolution, she alone could make that plain.

"You came to Hunston . . . to take me to my father . . . didn't you?" said Mary Carstairs. "Why . . . won't you do it?"

A fugitive wave of pallor ran up her cheek, leaving its white trail behind. She knew now that she had said the last word to him that she could say, and that if he wanted to go away, he must go. The heavy curtain of her lashes fell, veiling her eyes . . . but, as it chanced, fell slowly. He had turned at her words, very quickly; he caught the curtain half-drawn, and a look come and gone like an arrow

had shot through those windows into the lit place beyond.

"I could only do that," he began unsteadily — "I — you know how it is with me . . . To the longest day I live — I 'll love you . . . with every breath I draw. I could not do that — unless . . . Will you marry me?"

The stillness about them then was like a tangible thing, measureless and infinite. But into it faltered almost at once that voice like silver bells.

"If you 're *perfectly sure* you want me to," said Mary faintly.

Her eyes met his in a wonderful union, divinely sealed the promise of her lips, stamped it forever and ever with a heavenly stamp. . . .

The bay horses curveted and pranced, the coachman sprang to his seat, a big red motor backed, snorted, honked, and whizzed past them. The speechmaking was over. The little line of gay carriages, breaking itself into pieces, was maneuvering for rights of way homeward. The bay horses, turning, too, were caught in the press and must needs go slowly: so that the whole vivid pageant might have been but the ordered setting for this moment — for Laurence Varney and the girl he had sworn to carry home to her father. . . .

In the square, the lingering crowd, attuned to cheering, was summoning one name after another to noisy felicitation. Out of the tumult rose one persistent voice, clamoring a changeless request. Yes, it was Hackley's voice, very near, evidently on his own front porch, and he was saying over and over: "Lemme ask

you! Lemme ask you!" And about the moment the victoria — Tommy's victori' (Tommy himself, if the truth be known, riding snugly on the back springs at that very moment) — got safely put about, Mr. Hackley secured what public notice he required and divulged the nature of his request.

"*Fellers, what's the matter with Varney?*"

Instantly a thousand voices pulverized the man's fatuous anxiety. Hard after, as the gallant slogan swept on to make assurance doubly sure, they gave back the name in a roar like the rush of waters. . . .

But the man for whom all the voices strained themselves did not hear their doubt-destroying response, tumultuous though it was. Another voice, close beside him, had taken up that refrain, making all others inaudible, a shy, glad, whispering voice of chimes.

"*He's all right.*"

The common words were glorified by that voice, made over into a sweet and solemn benediction. He sat very silent, humbled and awed by the revealed visage of his own great happiness. At last she found courage to venture a look at him; and she saw that over his pale and disfigured face there had come a kind of glory, the joy of sudden peace out of pain.

Soon he spoke; and his words at first seemed to her very far afield, though there was that in his unsteadied voice which reassured her beyond speech.

"Would you mind stopping at the hotel — only a minute? I — have an old enemy there, and I feel that I *must* see him."

"Oh, no, no! — must you? Oh, please — I can't

let you go now! And I am afraid — afraid of what might happen —"

She stopped on that, somehow gathering without looking at him that she had not followed his thought.

"I want to take him by the hand," said Varney, "and tell him that it's all right now."

There was a light carriage-robe about them, for the vanished sun had left the breath of autumn in the air; and beneath it her hand, from which the white glove had been stripped, touched and was suddenly gathered into his own. A glorious tremble shot through his body; and now he could turn his shining face fully toward her.

"You aren't thinking that I could keep an enemy *to-day!*"

As the carriage stopped before the hotel entrance, he added:

"And I must tell him not to bother Peter any more. You see, Peter's a fine man, but he hasn't got my reasons for being — in love with all the world. I — I — I hate to go. Our first parting has come soon. But — this is a duty, and — and — good-bye!"

She never forgot the look upon his face.

"Good-bye. And oh! would you please *hurry?*"

With an herculean effort he detached himself from the carriage and rushed into the hotel. The same bored-looking clerk was sitting behind the desk, paring the same nails with the same office scissors. But this time, at sight of Varney, he sprang instantly to his feet, all smiles and eagerness to serve.

"Why, *good* evening, Mr. Varney! Well, sir!

You 're lookin' better 'n we expected, and I tell you Hunston 's mighty glad to see you up and about again."

Varney marveled how he had ever formed such a mean opinion of the clerk, whom he now saw to be a decidedly likable young man.

" Thank you — thank you! It 's a wonderful little city — Hunston — wonderful! Try a few of these cigars — that 's right; fill your pocket. And would you be good enough to send my card up to Mr. Higginson? Perhaps I 'd better write just a line —"

" Mr. Higginson 's in the small parlor, Mr. Varney — straight down the corridor. Yes, sir! Just came down and went in — I think he saw you coming —"

" And ran away again? Why, bless me, what 's the old chap afraid of?"

He started gayly down the dim hall to the right of the desk, swinging his stick and humming to himself; and presently became aware that a man was following silently at his elbow.

" It 's me — Callery," said the man apologetically, as Varney turned. " I—I 'll just be here, Mr. Varney, you know, if anything 's wanted."

Varney laughed again. " You 're mighty good to me, Mr. Callery," he said cordially — " you and Mr. Stobo — I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. But it is n't a bit of use, you know! I 'm positively not going to kill anybody to-day."

" Yes, sir," said Callery. " Here 's the door, Mr. Varney."

" This one?"

" Yes, sir. He come runnin' down the steps, spoke

a word to the clerk, and then he dodges down here and slams the door behind him. Seen you through the window, I guess — "

"Well, I 'll just step in and have a look at him, Mr. Callery. Excuse me a minute."

He rapped on the closed door and called in a loud cheery voice: "Mr. Higginson."

"Come in," said a voice from within — a rather agitated voice which had a curiously familiar ring in the young man's ears.

Varney swung open the door, stepped into the small parlor, and (greatly to the disappointment of Mr. Callery) closed the door behind him.

In the middle of the room, staring nervously toward the door, stood a handsome elderly gentleman, of distinguished presence and clothes of a rather notable perfection. At sight of him the young man's advance halted in utter bewilderment, and he fell back limply against the shut door.

But the elderly gentleman came running toward him with a suppressed cry, and seizing the young man's hand disarmingly in both his own, threw himself almost hysterically upon his apologia.

"Can you forgive me, my boy? Ah, I 'll confess that I 've dreaded this meeting, while longing for it, too! You look badly — ah, very badly! — yet — not bitter, not resentful — thank God, not unhappy! My boy, can you find it in your heart to forgive an old man who has suffered deeply for his sins?"

Out of his whirling confusion, his insane sense of the world suddenly gone upside down and the familiar

order stood upon its head, the young man laughed dazedly. But he kept tight hold of the old one's hand, and fell to patting it with wild reassurance.

"Everything 's all right — all right! Yes, indeed, sir. Of course! But I don't understand — I don't grasp — I came here looking for — Are you — *you* — Mr. Higginson?"

"Ah, you had n't guessed then? And yet who could wonder, such a terrible, frightful mix-up as it all became! You see," the old gentleman hurried on, lowering his gaze, yet already recovering something of his normal composure, "you had scarcely started before I — I became strangely uneasy over the — seriousness of the matter and the possible consequences, and — and decided that I had best come on myself in — in a private manner, merely to have an eye on things. Believe me, that was all I meant. But I did not dare let you know that I was here, even in that way, having promised you that I would not interfere, and besides — I feared that you might think I had — ah — withheld the full facts about — her age."

In an access of nervous self-consciousness, the old man's voice trailed to an uncertain pause; and Varney comforted him with a burst of bewildered laughter.

"Forgive my glassy stare — no offence intended, but my head 's going around, Mr. Higginson! It 's all still nebulous, you know — topsy-turvy — incredible! That day of the luncheon, now — the mysterious warning — the bribe to Ferguson to smash up the yacht —"

A fine flush spread over the old man's face to the

roots of his silvered hair. Yet it was obvious that the young man's unaffected cordiality had heartened him immensely.

"Well, you see, my dear boy," he began, embarrassedly, "by that time I had met her — she was so sweet to me from the start — and I began to hope that such heroic, such painful, measures might not be necessary. Yet perhaps they would be, after all, and so — ah, I did wrong, I know — wrong! — and yet — don't you see how inevitably it all came about? I did not dare communicate with you, begging you to let matters stand a few days — fearing that upon learning of my presence you would simply abandon the commission entirely, and God knows you would have been justified in doing so. Yet I longed to postpone the — the final step, holding it in reserve, in the ardent hope that it might be avoided entirely. So I — gave instructions to Ferguson. It was wrong not to trust you, and oh, I have been punished for it, suffered miserably — "

"*Dear* sir! I'm so sorry! But that is all past now — all past — and to-day all's right with the world!"

The old man's hands tightened their earnest clasp. Tears sprang suddenly into his fine eyes.

"But oh, I have been richly blest, too — far beyond my deserts! The night that you were hurt — I came quite unexpectedly face to face with Mrs. Carstairs at the cottage. We had a long talk that night — a wonderful talk, which gave me a totally new point of view, brought me new light and peace. And now — everything is arranged, and if you have truly forgiven

me, I am happy as I never dreamed for happiness again."

"Forgiven you! For what, dear sir? Why, don't you begin to guess yet what you have done for me?"

He tucked the old man's hand masterfully under his arm, and drew him to the door.

"God bless you, boy, for what *you've* done for me and mine. But — where — where are we going?"

"Out into the world," said Varney, "where Mary Carstairs is waiting for you and me."

"But — but — I feel extremely nervous — does she know?"

"She is going to know in about thirty seconds, and we are the three happiest people in America."

"I think," said the old man palely, "that she — she likes me —"

"In less than a minute," said the young one, "she is going to love you."

His voice betrayed him a little on the words, but he instantly recovered his poise, and, hand on the knob, faced the other with his gayest smile.

"Tell me, Mr. Higginson — *did* you skip to New York that afternoon, when Maginnis and I, you know, dashed up here to assassinate you?"

"Yes," replied the handsome old intriguer with a nervous cough, "yes, I — you see, it had been reported to me that Mr. Maginnis had threatened to horsewhip me in the public square, after my attempt to buy the paper and save us all from scandal. So naturally, on the afternoon you mention, I — I anticipated trouble. However, I quietly returned to Hunston on the next

train back, going, of course, to a different hotel, a most dreadful little place —"

Varney shouted.

"It 's just as Peter said, I declare! You 're the noblest plotter of them all, Mr. Higginson. Dear old Hunston will not look upon your like again."

The two enemies came out into the corridor arm-in-arm, and advanced in utter amity to the doorway. And as they walked, Varney's tongue unloosed, and he spoke his still incredible happiness aloud: only, because he was not Latin and exuberant, he spoke it according to the indirect uses of his race.

"That man we passed standing in the hall — the one with the face of incredulity and chagrin — was old Callery — horribly miffed because you and I failed to lock in mortal combat. He 's a fine fellow, Callery is, only I imagine he 's had a lot of hard luck. Did you ever see a prettier little hotel than this — I mean, of course, for a town of this size? *Look!* That 's the clerk behind the desk there. An amazingly clever fellow — you just ought to have seen how sharp he was in knowing where you were — and that 's a *Cypriani* cigar he 's smoking, if you 'd like to know. Jim Hackley's house is just over on the other corner — why, you can *see* it from here. I want you to know Hackley, sir! A great big whimsical fellow with a fist like a ham and a heart like a woman's. . . . Ah! . . ."

They emerged from the hotel upon the noisy street, still lively with the rush of home-goers; and now the two men stood side by side before the waiting carriage, and Varney's flow of talk had ceased.

From the square there came the shouts of many lingerers, making merry in the tail of the great day according to their desire. Down either sidewalk poured a stream of people, laughing, talking, and calling to each other; the street still rumbled under passing vehicles; the Palace Hotel, in particular, had become a lodestone and near to Tommy's victoria much human traffic converged. In truth, it was a public place where all who wished could see, and many did see. Yet there was nothing in the little scene to fix the gaze of the casual wayfarer: a young girl sitting in a well-appointed carriage, and two men, one young and one old, approaching with bared heads to speak to her. Only a close observer would have been likely to notice that the old man's cheek was markedly pale, and that upon the marred face of the younger one there had descended a strange and solemn look. . . .

For Mary there had been no surprise in seeing the young man come out to her with the old one on his arm — had he not told her that he went in peace? — and even the glorious metamorphosis in Mr. Higginson's appearance quite failed to arrest her attention. She had smoothed his approach with a welcoming smile and the beginning of a gay greeting; but her eyes were for her lover. And now as she saw the look on Varney's face, and became aware of the odd and impressive silence in which he stood, like one called to officiate at some high ceremony, understanding incredibly dawned within her, and she was suddenly without speech or breath. Her little greeting was never finished; all at once her face, grown wonderfully sweet,

was whiter than the old man's own; and the eyes which she now turned back to him were full and overfull of tears.

"Miss Carstairs," said Varney, not quite steadily, "may I have the great honor of presenting your father?"

THE END

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